

FANTASY CROSSROADS¹⁴



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FC #15 is planned for December 1978. Advance orders are being accepted at \$3 per copy. We are still not an open market for manuscripts. We've got an extensive backlog of material and until it is exhausted we are returning any new submissions unread. We do encourage letters of comment (LOCS) and printed letters earn a complimentary copy of the issue they appear in.

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by Jonathan bacon

ramblings

FANTASY CROSSROADS seems to compile itself...I do less and less, other than just fill the holes. This issue decided it wanted to get "Curse of Bana-gui" by Charles Saunders into print. I argued against it. That 14,000 word monster was written in 1976 and I've had it in my file since. FC argued that was long enough, I countered citing the cost of typesetting (and I already had other material ready to go). FC pointed out that "Curse" was already illustrated by John Stewart AND that despite several illustrations on hand, none of John's work had yet appeared in the mag. "Good Point" I said grudgingly. FC won.

Then I figured I owed it to Paul Allen to get his "Of Swords & Sorcery" column into this issue, especially after his highly acclaimed article on Moorcock's "Eternal Champion" last issue. I said he deserved a curtain call and that readers expected his column every issue. FC had the audacity to write Paul (forging my signature) and asked if he minded not being represented this issue. He wrote back agreeing. It would give him a needed breather since his **FANTASY NEWSLETTER** (1015 West 36th Street, Loveland, Colorado 80537) is keeping Paul mighty busy. "Well, maybe that's OK" I said...now becoming a bit unsettled at this take over.

"But if we leave out the Kenneth Smith nudes portfolio..." I started. Then FC pointed out that the portfolio was paid for in advance, Steve Riley had written an introduction and sent several nice decorations for the piece. Besides, the old nag pointed out, "Nudes sell issues and you do need to sell to keep me alive!"

I won't belabor the point, something other than the Jonathan Bacon I knew and loved has taken over this magazine. I've seen it happen before too. Young fanzine editors start publishing enthusiastically, soliciting manuscripts, writing personal letters and giving away time like it would never end. About the fourth or fifth issue, they begin tightening up.

The editorial monster bug sets in. They claim to have a perpetual backlog. They get short tempered with correspondents. Their enthusiasm ends while they labor to just get the next issue out. The joy is gone. The monster starts showing. I've seen it too often, but it won't get me. I refuse to let FC become a burden.

This magazine will not rule me...I'll control it. I'll not become another "old fanzine editor" who has lost his spark and turns into some nameless, soulless monster. I haven't changed and never will. Right FC? FC are you listening to me? Wake up...we've got to plan next issue.

Oh, I almost forgot. Speaking of old editors, I'd like to call your attention to an old "author" who is a fairly "new" editor. I'm speaking of Andrew J Offutt (or is it Andrew J. Offutt...) I never seem to remember how to spell it). Anyway, according to the introduction of **SWORDS AGAINST DARKNESS** (SAD) III, Andrew is around 118 years of age. I've never met him but I can picture Andrew all the same. You know the type: stooped, little old man with long white beard, probably balding on top with a nice wreath of long white hair to accent the shiny, bald head. And if he doesn't like your critique of his anthology, he hits you with his cane (made of the finest twisted oak from the Black Forest). Anyway, the man is unimportant. His work is valued though. SAD III is obviously the third anthology under that title done for Zebra Books. It is the first of his anthologies which I've read cover to cover and in the order printed (I typically scatter read and hardly ever completely read an anthology).

SAD III reads like a roster of past and future contributors to FC. Among the contributors are Ramsey Campbell

(with a round robin chapter coming), Manly Wade Wellman, Richard L. Tierney, David Drake, Wayne Hooks (with an upcoming story in FC), Darrell Schweitzer (represented this issue), Geo. W. Proctor (Geo, can you send me a shorter story? Those long monsters are hard to cram in), Poul Anderson, Tanith Lee, Jon DeCles (Marion Zimmer Bradley's brother), David Madison and others.

Heroic fantasy, my first love, can become very stale. The genre has the potential to mass produce cardboard characters and oodles of thud and blunder. With editors like Offutt around that tendency is greatly reduced. Every story in SAD III is unique. There are no cardboard Conans. Some of the most unique stories come from fairly unknown authors. Hooks' character Har-kol refuses to become a carbon copy Elric. Vardeman (oh yes, I forgot to mention Robert E.) creates a non-human hero whom we tend not to trust until the very end. Then we see all the humor and friendship we'd missed. You can trust Krek, but not his mate. Tanith Lee's "In The Balance" is a delightful little twist of a story. I hope we see more of Cernarl. DeCles' "Rites of Kings" is an abstract morality tale, but certainly worth reading for the images and mood.

Ultimately, if I were coerced into naming my favorite story in the anthology, I'd confront a tie between "The Sword of Spartacus" by Tierney and "Descales' Skull" by David C. Smith (Oh heck that leaves out David Drake's "The Mantichore" and it's good too!). "Sword" has just the right combination of swordplay and sorcery. It's the epitome of a good S&S story, the kind I never tire of reading. "Skull" is a retelling of the old "Monkey's Paw" (three wishes) fable, except this time the wishes are divided but not the effects.

I could prattle on for hours about each story in SAD III. There's not a weak link in the anthology. It even manages not to boast the name of Robert E. Howard on the cover or inside blurb page. Can you imagine an anthology strong enough to stand on its own two feet (or should I say binding) without mention of REH? SAD III can and does. Go out and buy the \$1.95 paperback today, and don't forget volumes I and II.

From an entirely different vein comes **AS EVENING ADVANCES** by Joseph Payne Brennan, published by Charles Melvin, (Crystal Visions Press, 809 Cleermont Dr., Huntsville, Alabama 35801). The three dollar verse booklet features a fair sampling of work by Brennan. Unfortunately, much of it is only remotely related to the fantasy genre. Brennan has long been one of my favorite poets. His work is full of moody images and this volume is no exception. (continued on page 38.)

The curse of bana-gu

by charles r. saunders

Relentlessly the tropical rainstorm fell from a leaden sky. Mighty baobab trees bent their boughs as if in supplication to the pelting deluge, and great herds of zebra and gnu huddled motionless on the plain. The wind howled like a hunting beast through the treetops and elephant grass. Thunder rolled like the wardrums of the gods, with white flashes of lightning their spears.

So dense was the rainfall that even the hulking rhinoceros stood with its head held downward lest it be choked by the volume of water pouring into its nostrils. As the beasts did by instinct, so did three humans keep their faces down as they squatted in a circle in a clear space between a patch of tall grass and a large copse of trees.

Though the humans seemed soaked and bedraggled, they were actually far more comfortable than they looked...as long as their heads stayed down. The rain was warm and their garments few, so the water pounding on bare black skin was not an unpleasant sensation. They did not bother to seek shelter under the nearby trees, for they knew that for all its furious intensity the storm would not last much longer. And they welcomed the washing away of the grime of many days of travel through bush and savannah.

Of the three, one was a huge, powerfully-built warrior. Rain trickled down his heavily-muscled frame like rivulets through hill country. On his broad featured black face rested an expression of brooding preoccupation, as if his thoughts were on matters more important than mere rainstorms.

Next to him sat a beautiful black woman, stunning of face and magnificent of figure. Droplets of rain sparkled like diamonds in her bush of kinky black hair, while thin streams of water clothed her mostly-naked ebony curves in threads of silver. Her expression reflected boredom and petulance at the delay in their journey.

The third wayfarer was a Bambuti pygmy, a perfectly proportioned black man the size of a ten-year-old child. He wore more garments than the other two, and his sleeveless Cushite tunic clung damply to his mahogany-hued skin. Equally drenched was the colorful skullcap perched on his round head. His face

bore an expression of frustration, as if he thought that with just a trifle more of arcane experience, he might have succeeded in hastening the end of the storm...which was precisely the case...

"How much do you know about storms, Pomphis?" the girl asked suddenly, raising her voice to be heard over the wind.

"Everything," the pygmy answered automatically.

"Then can you tell me when this rain is going to stop?"

"Damballah!" Pomphis swore. "You, Tanisha, could well learn a lesson from the monkeys in yonder tree."

The monkeys the Bambuti was referring to lined the lower branches of a nearby acacia. Their long black-and-white fur was sodden and their huge eyes melancholy, but they did not protest the discomforts of the downpour.

"They, at least, have the intelligence not to complain," Pomphis concluded, driving home his point in typically thorough fashion.

Miffed, Tanisha slid closer to the huge warrior. Looking into his face, she noted that his eyes were focused somewhere beyond the horizon and his heavy-lipped mouth was set in a grim, hard line.

"What troubles you, Imaro," she inquired in a tone very much different from the one she had used with Pomphis.

"I wonder if, while we crouch here, another sorcerer stalks us," Imaro answered. "Chikanda said there were others of his kind; a whole city of them far to the south."

"How could they ever find us in this wilderness?" scoffed Tanisha.

"The Sorcerers of Naama are very dangerous foes," Pomphis cut in. "And Imaro has slain two of them. They will surely seek vengeance. But never before has a man not versed in necromantic lore managed to overcome even one of the Full Adepts. By now, they must be beginning to fear our oversized friend."

"Fear him they should!" said Tanisha. "Imaro is no ordinary man."

"That we all know," said Pomphis, rolling his dark eyes skyward at Tanisha's double meaning. "But ordinary or not, our lives are in danger until we

get to Cush. Of course, the further north we go, the more the influence of Naama wanes."

"The wind wanes. The sky grows less gray. Soon this rain will stop and there will be less talk and more marching," Imaro said, paying scant attention to the byplay of his companions. Though he was well aware that storms such as this were common at the beginning of the Nyumbani wet season, he could not suppress a suspicion that it had been conjured by the Naamans to impede his progress...

Then the storm abated as suddenly as it had struck. The iron-gray clouds dissipated, and the fiery Nyumbani sun again ruled the sky, sending down its heat in shimmering yellow waves.

On the green savannah, the multitude of beasts shook showers of droplets from their rainsoaked hides and resumed their grazing. In the lofty reaches of the acacias and baobabs, multicolored birds and screaming monkeys resumed their raucous chorus andreckless acrobatics. Below them the three humans rose to their feet to continue their interrupted journey. Already the sun's rays were drying their skins and clothing. The latter aspect of the drying process was important only to Pomphis, for Imaro was clad only in the tattered loincloth which, along with his sword and spear, was all the Ilyassai warrior had salvaged from his brief tour in the army of the kingdom of Kundwa. And Tanisha wore nothing but a brief scrap of translucent cloth twisted loosely around her supple waist.

The trio was traveling in an easterly direction, hoping to reach the port-city of Mogadishu before the wet season reached its full strength. According to Pomphis, the quickest way to reach Cush was the sea-route northward via the Bahari Masheriki, the Eastern Ocean. The alternative, a trek through the Khagga swamps, would be much more dangerous and time-consuming. Though Imaro had asserted that he had no fear of the Khagga, Pomphis had been able to convince the Ilyassai and Tanisha of the importance of reaching Cush as soon as possible. The Bambuti's vivid descriptions of the wonders of the sea journey, the sight of the broad Amgalla River pouring lazily into the

sea, the journey upstream to jewel-like Lake Reyassa on whose shores lay the great city of Napata, were enthralling to Tanisha, if not to Imaro.

The barbarian's thoughts were rooted much more solidly in the present. As Pomphis rambled on, Imaro's were the eyes that constantly scanned the horizon for signs of enemies bestial or human. His was the spear that brought down the antelopes and bushpigs that formed the bulk of their diet.

It was several hours after the storm had passed when Imaro spotted several thin columns of smoke rising beyond a swell in the plain. Immediately he drew the attention of Tanisha and Pomphis to what he saw.

"Looks like a small village, from the number of fires," the warrior said. Pomphis agreed.

"Let's go there," Tanisha suggested eagerly. "For one night at least, I'd like to sleep in a bed, not the branches of a tree."

"You didn't complain about the branches when we..."

"Never mind!" said Tanisha. Had her

"Pomphis, are we still in Kundwa, or have we crossed the border into Zanj?" Imaro asked.

"That's Zeng, not 'Zanj,'" the Bambuti corrected. "Yes, we are indeed in Zengish territory. But I've never heard of any dwellings in this part of the country. Perhaps these are nomads."

"You can't judge an entire nation by the actions of just one person."

"Whatever they are, they're people of Zanj, and not to be trusted."

"But I want to sleep on a bed, even if it's only a pallet of straw," Tanisha persisted.

"Do you not remember Bomunu?" Imaro snarled. "He was from Zanj."

Tanisha fell silent. It had been Bo-

again. "You can't judge an entire nation by the actions of just one person. Despite this wilderness, we travel in complex, civilized lands, Imaro."

"God of the spear!" Imaro swore. "Life was simpler on the Tamburure Plains. Everybody knew that the Turkhana were treacherous, the Zamburu all cattle-thieves, the Gi-kuyu all dirt-eating cowards..."

"And the Ilyassai?" Pomphis pressed.

It was Imaro's turn to fall silent, as he always did when the tribe from which he had been exiled was mentioned. In an unguarded moment, he had told them of his slaying the sorcerer Chitendu in the Place of Stones, but after that he had said nothing.

(ii)

They arrived at the village sooner than Imaro had anticipated. It was sunset, and the long black shadows and muted crimson of dying sunlight lent a sinister aspect to the palisaded collection of thatched dwellings. To the west of the village lay a pasture in which a herd of speckled goats bleated and grazed. The way north was guarded by a small forest of ill-shaped trees shrouded in dense vines and foliage.

The unsavory appearance of the village dampened Tanisha's enthusiasm for the prospect of spending the night there. Nor did Pomphis retain much of his curiosity concerning the culture of its inhabitants. However, neither cared to admit their sudden misgivings to Imaro, who had finally consented to the venture.

As the three wanderers approached the gates of the palisade, startled goats and yapping dogs scurried from their path. Strangely, though, no band of suspicious spearmen emerged to challenge them.

Then they passed through the open gate, and were immediately surrounded by a horde of men, women, and children. The people were motivated more by curiosity than hostility as they stared at the strangers. Pomphis was the object of many astonished gazes, especially from the children, many of whom were already taller than he. Like most of the East Coast races, these villagers tended to be above average in height, lean in build, and narrower of nose and lip than was usual in Nyumbani. In color they ranged between Pomphis' mahogany and Imaro's cocoa-brown.

The men were attired in tunic-like garments that left one shoulder bare and ended at the knee. They bore few weapons other than iron stilettos and knob-headed clubs of wood.

Skirts of brown bark-cloth covered



skin been less black, her blush would have been visible for Pomphis to chuckle at. Even so, he grinned and raised his eyebrows.

munu who had betrayed Imaro's outlaw band to the Azanians and abducted Tanisha months before.

"That's Zeng," the pygmy corrected

"They bore few weapons other than iron stilettos and knob-headed clubs of wood."

the women's bodies from waist to ankle, and shawls of similar fabric hung from their shoulders to just above the nipples of their conical breasts. Their scalps were shaved completely, and it was with ill-concealed disgust that they regarded the magnificent woolly mane encircling Tanisha's head.

Imaro spoke first, using the common language of the East Coast lands. "Who is chieftain here?" he demanded.

A tall, thin man stepped forward. He wore no towering headgear of fur and feathers to signify his office, but the rest of the villagers demonstrated their deference by clearing a path for his approach.

"I am Kimau," the man announced. "In the name of my people, I welcome you to the land of the Rendille. What might we do for you?"

He knows his Old Codes well, Imaro thought. "We seek shelter here until the sun rises tomorrow. We are on our way to..."

"Mogadishu," Pomphis supplied, aware of the barbarian's tendency to mispronounce the name of their destination. "We are willing to pay."

"Of course you may stay with us," Imaro exclaimed effusively. "It is a rare occasion to see strangers in Rendille. We can discuss...payment later. For now, we must celebrate."

"Pardon me," Pomphis said politely. "But if I remember my geography correctly, this area lies between Mogadishu and Kalambo. Don't trade caravans ever stop here?"

The Rendille chieftain glanced sharply at Pomphis, and something sinister passed momentarily through his eyes. His smile seemed forced as he said, "There are easier routes between the two cities, outsider. Besides, we have nothing of value to trade." A finality in Kimau's tone indicated that he would say no more about the matter.

"It will soon be dark," Kimau con-

tinued. "All three of my wives will prepare your feast, and you shall sleep in my own kibanda."

The wanderers looked askance at each other as they followed the chieftain to his compound. Even in their most optimistic expectations they had never anticipated such a welcome. There was something suspicious about the eagerness with which the Rendille were going about their tasks of preparation...despite the approach of dusk, Imaro would have preferred to move on. But for Pomphis and Tanisha, the comforts the Rendille offered were still preferable to another night in the open.

By the time darkness had fallen, they were sitting on ornately carved stools in places of honor among the elders of the Rendille. Around a huge blazing fire sat five concentric circles of what must have been the entire population of the village. As the night progressed, the strangers were plied with meat, yams, and plantains, washed down with large quantities of the local liquor, a blend of palm wine and fermented goats' milk. Accenting the atmosphere of the fete was the steady, insistent beat of a group of drummers occupying the innermost circle.

Tanisha clung closely to Imaro. The many glances the Rendille were casting her way were causing her to feel uneasy. It was not that their stares were lascivious...Tanisha was long since accustomed to that. It was something less definable; a vague foreboding of impending evil...

"Do not drink so much, Imaro," she whispered nervously. "How do you expect to protect me if you can't stand up?"

"You won't need protection later tonight," the Ilyassai belched, sliding a massive arm about her bare shoulders.

"I'm serious," she persisted, wriggling impatiently against his grasp. "Pomphis, don't you notice the queer way these people are staring at me?"

The Bambuti, who was in deep conversation with a Rendille girl whose breasts jutted an inch above his eyes, mumbled an inconsequential reply.

Before Tanisha could say more about her premonition, the drummers abruptly increased their tempo. As if on signal, many of the younger Rendille rose to their feet and began to dance. The young men and girls displayed fantastic physical coordination, moving their arms, legs, and hips in separate directions, yet maintaining the underlying rhythm of the drummers.

The dancing distracted Tanisha from her worries. She only watched a short while before her lips began to curl in disdain. Suddenly she leaped up and joined them. Her presence was startling

to the dancers, who had been unconscious of all save the sensations in their gyrating bodies. Deliberately, Tanisha picked up the drummers' beat and flowed smoothly into the dance the Rendille were doing. But the seductive grace of her movements and the splendor of her half-nude body soon overshadowed the lesser endowments of the Rendille girls. Within moments the young Rendille men were vying to dance near her, while Imaro glowered ominously over his liquor-cup.

Noting the dangerous glint in his friend's eyes, Pomphis suggested, "Why not show these upstarts your Dance of the Warrior, Imaro?"

More inflamed by the Rendille liquor than he would have cared to admit, the Ilyassai sprang to his feet. His hand found the shaft of the spear that seldom left his side, and like a great cat he charged into the strutting band of Rendille youths. As they scattered, Imaro bellowed a deep-throated war-cry that reverberated above even the pounding of the drums.

Tanisha was, of course, far from frightened of the barbarian's warlike demeanor. Sliding her tongue tip along her full lips, she pantomimed distress, as though she were menaced by something creeping unseen into the circle of firelight. Then Imaro bounded past Tanisha and executed a dance the like of which the Rendille had never imagined.

Leaping and whirling with an agility incredible for a man his size, Imaro seemed to mesmerize the drummers into following his own savage rhythm as he battled his symbolic antagonist. At times his motions were so fluid that his body seemed all lithe sinew, with no rigid bone. He manipulated the heavy spear with such ease that the weapon became an extension of his hands. Throughout the abstract struggle, Tanisha danced in a slow circle around her lover, as if tantalizing him to greater efforts on her behalf.

Finally, with a yell of triumph, the young giant dealt the death-blow, driving his spear deep into the ground. As he stood with his muscular arms raised high, Tanisha came to him and their sweat-streaked bodies smacked together in an impassioned embrace.

Tanisha and Imaro's performance had reduced the Rendille to awed silence. Pomphis grinned knowingly. They hadn't seen anything yet...

Then, remembering where they were, the torrid couple returned to their stools. The other dancers, who had long since relinquished the stage to the strangers, also sat down. Now the drumming slowed considerably. Indeed, the Rendille's mood of gaiety was, in imperceptible degrees, beginning to diminish.

But Imaro and Tanisha were far too absorbed in one another to notice any changes, and Pomphish was too drunk to care.

Suddenly the cadaverous figure of Kimau loomed before them. In his hands rested an earthen bowl filled with an amber-colored fluid.

"That was a beautiful dance, and deserves a special drink which is reserved only for honored guests," he said grandiloquently as he proffered the bowl.

Normally the wanderers would have found dubious the eagerness with which the chieftain was urging them to drink. And the eerily expectant expressions on the faces of the other Rendille would also have aroused their wariness.

But now their minds were befogged with liquor and revelry, so they accepted the bowl and drank. Tanisha took only a

"There is indeed a price for the hospitality of the Rendille," Kimau said, "Take her to the Bana-gui."

few decorous sips, but Imaro and Pomphish gulped deep draughts.

Smacking his lips in relish, Pomphish laid the bowl aside. Then he fell on his side and lay motionless. "Drugged..." Imaro choked as he lurched upward. Then the ground buckled beneath him, and he sprawled forward onto his face. Even though she was less affected by the small amount she had swallowed, Tanisha still sat with a blank stare on her face. Clawlike hands gripped her and dragged her from her stool.

"There is indeed a price for the hospitality of the Rendille," Kimau said, an unpleasant smile curving his lips. "Take her to the Bana-gui," he ordered.

"What of these?" one villager asked, pointing his stiletto toward the still forms of Imaro and Pomphish.

"Dump them outside the palisade. The hyenas will dispose of them."

The drums muttered sullenly as the Rendille hastened to carry out Kimau's commands. Soon they were marching out of the village in a double file, leaving only a few warriors behind to guard the children and goats.

Semi-conscious, Tanisha was carried high above the ground by the up-raised arms of five Rendille. Her arms and legs were securely bound, and her head lolled backward as overhanging clusters of moonlit foliage swam past her half-closed eyes. So complete was her drug-induced lassitude that she felt

neither alarm nor discomfort at the thongs cutting into her flesh or the jouncing gait of her bearers.

The journey was not a long one, for the Rendille's destination was less than halfway through the dark forest. A bog stretching wide across the villagers' path marked the end of the procession. No trees grew in the malignant-looking muck, and in the indigo patch of sky that showed in the break in the forest, a crescent moon glowed like the leer of a demon.

As her captors lowered her to the ground, Tanisha felt awareness creeping back through the swirling drugmists. She heard a single drum speak in staccato counterpoint to a low, monotonous chant. The words the Rendille were mouthing were in a language totally dissimilar to the tongue they had used in the village...

neck. Never before had Imaro failed her... Could it be that the treacherous Rendille had managed to slay him and Pomphish? She suddenly remembered that she had seen the huge Ilyassai fall before she'd been carried from the village... had they poisoned him?

The soggy muck poured into her mouth, silencing her cries. Then only her eyes showed above the surface. They rolled in fright as she strained to raise her face for a final lungful of fetid air.

Then she was gone from sight. A few bubbles inflated and popped out of existence, a final forlorn signal of her passage as the Rendille continued their litany: "Bana-gui...Bana-gui...Bana-gui..."

(iii)

A blast of foul beast-breath and a shower of saliva greeted Imaro's return to consciousness. His eyes snapped open to stare dizzily into a pair of yellowish orbs ablaze with feral fire. Huge fangs glimmered in gaping jaws as a maniacal cackling filled Imaro's ears. His mazed mind struggled to identify the source of the hellish sound...

Hyena! The realization immediately cleared the Ilyassai's head. Roaring like an angry lion, Imaro struck upward. The double-fisted blow caught the hyena beneath its slavering jaw. With a yelp of pain the shaggy beast somersaulted backward, and Imaro bounded to his feet.

He knew that he had just escaped death. For if he hadn't awakened in time, even his iron-muscled limbs would have been reduced to pulp by the hyena's bone-crushing jaws. Eyes glaring in rage, the Ilyassai reached reflexively for his sword. Its hilt smacked solidly into his hand; the Rendille had not bothered to relieve him of the weapon.

Quickly Imaro looked to Pomphish. He did not fail to note the shadowy shapes skulking in the moonlight, one of which was nuzzling the unmoving form of the Bambuti.

Again the roaring war-cry burst from Imaro's lips as he charged toward the scavengers hunched over Pomphish. Well did the warrior know Fisi the hyena from his life on the Tamburur Plain. Despite their well-earned reputation for cowardice, a pack of hungry hyenas was fully as dangerous as one of the great cats.

But Imaro knew that Fisi feared two things: the wrath of the lion and the weapons of man. Combining the sound of the beast and the glint of his sword, Imaro was a figure of terror to the hyenas. As the one menacing Pomphish turned and fled, the others paused in

their advance. Their high-pitched parodies of laughter deteriorated into fearful whines, and the hyena-pack abruptly scattered across the plain like four-legged chaff before a storm.

One, however, did not join the flight. It was the one Imaro had struck upon regaining consciousness. Maddened by the blow, the scavenger had gathered its courage and awaited an opportunity to attack. As Imaro bent to attend to Pomphis, the beast, which had crept unseen into position, launched its ungainly bulk straight at his back.

A slight rustle in the grass warned the Ilyassai. Quickly he dodged aside, and teeth that could have splintered the thighbone of an elephant clicked on empty air. The hyena landed heavily two yards away from Pomphis. Snarling, Fisi whirled to attack again. Before it could leap, Imaro was upon it.

With lightning speed the warrior had swerved over Pomphis and raised his sword high above his head. Fisi lunged at Imaro's leg, but the Ilyassai's blade descended in a shimmering blur, ending in a death-shriek and a shower of crimson gore.

For a moment the barbarian stood over the corpse of the hyena. The eater of dead things was carrion itself now, its body nearly hewn in half by Imaro's vicious blow. Soon its fellow scavengers would scent the widening pool of blood and return to an unexpected feast. To hyenas, the dead were dead, regardless of species.

Again Imaro 'knelt' by the side of Pomphis. The Bambuti was beginning to show signs of waking, his limbs twitched and reluctant groans issued from his mouth. Impatiently Imaro shook Pomphis' shoulder to speed his awakening. With a final inarticulate protest, the pygmy blinked open his eyes.

"Damn you, Imaro!" he cursed as he sat up. "I was dreaming that I was once again in the arms of Princess Ilenga of Azania, hearing her sweet laughter...but then a lion roared before her bedroom door. That must have symbolized the wrath of her father the Sha'a, when he found us together..."

"It symbolized me, saving your hide again," Imaro grunted as he used a handful of grass to cleanse his blade of Fisi's blood.

"Saving my hide?" Pomphis asked in bewilderment. "What happened? We were drinking in the village...they drugged us! Where is Tanisha?"

"Gone," Imaro replied tersely. "The Rendille took her and left us for food for the hyenas."

"Then we'll have to rescue her from the village. But how can only the two of us hope to tear her away from an entire tribe?"

"She's not in the village. Look there." Imaro pointed to a track of freshly-flattened grass that led to the brooding rampart of the forest.

"It looks as if the whole village marched past here," Pomphis observed. "There must be some kind of ceremony going on in the forest."

"We'll find out when we get there. Come on." Already, the Ilyassai was gliding like a leopard along the trail of the Rendille. Pomphis followed, scurrying to keep pace with the warrior's lengthy strides.

"You were right, Pomphis...Chikanda's evil kind do not give up the chase," Imaro muttered as they approached the dark wall of trees. "If they've harmed Tanisha they will find out that an Ilyassai does not give up either..."

"But this does not appear to be the work of the Naamans," Pomphis mused. "They would have taken all three of us, not just Tanisha. But then what could either the Naamans or the Rendille want with her?"

"Remember what happened to us in Mwenni," Imaro reminded. "Chikanda abducted you, but only as bait. It was me he wanted." The Ilyassai's voice hardened. "If I don't find Tanisha alive, my path will lie southward to Naama, not northward to Cush."

These words elicited a gasp of consternation from Pomphis. "Imaro, no!" he pleaded. "On their home ground the Sorcerers of Naama are too powerful even for the Cushites. Were that not so, the Cushites would have cleaned out that den of vipers centuries ago. Alone, you could never hope to overcome them."

"I've overcome two of them already," Imaro pointed out. They were among the trees now. Only feebly did the light of the crescent moon penetrate the thick overgrowth. But the vision of both the barbarian and the pygmy was keen, and they were able to make out the path of broken twigs that marked the passage of the Rendille.

Suddenly Imaro halted. "Hold," he whispered to Pomphis. "Listen..."

The Bambuti strained his ears until he too could hear the sounds of murmured conversation and approaching footsteps. Silhouetted shapes became visible in the gloom as the Rendille returned from their ceremony.

Imaro hissed a few quick words into Pomphis' ear. The pygmy nodded agreement, and they slipped behind two nearby trees. In the darkness they were all but invisible to the people passing them. The Rendille trudged in scattered clusters, heads down and voices soft. After the majority of them had gone, there remained a few silent stragglers who preferred to be alone with their

demon-haunted musings.

But the ruminations of the last of these, the chieftain Kimau, were interrupted by the clamp of a huge hand across his mouth. Before the shocked Rendille could mount a struggle that hand bore him soundlessly behind a treetrunk.

Without effort Imaro kept Kimau immobile until he was certain no more Rendille were coming. Then after warning the trembling Rendille to remain silent, Imaro released his grip.

Immediately Kimau broke and fled. But before he had run three steps a small foot shot out and sent him tumbling to the ground. Terrified, Kimau cringed against a misshapedbole. Two shadowy figures loomed before him, one improbably large, the other even more improbably small.

"Y-y-you..." the Rendille stammered. "You are supposed to be dead. The hyenas..."

"...Are dining on one of their own," growled Imaro. "Now, you will tell us what you've done with Tanisha...or Fisi will have another unexpected meal tonight!"

The Bog of the Bana-gui was a secret jealously guarded by the Rendille people. Dire punishments were the fate of any who revealed it to an outsider. Even Kimau's status as chieftain would not exempt him. But to Kimau, no punishment seemed quite so dire or immediate as the massive hands of the Ilyassai, opening and closing like talons of iron.

"I will take you to where we...left her," Kimau said. Imaro's hands swooped down and dragged the Rendille roughly to his feet.

"Take us, then," Imaro ordered, grasping Kimau by the nape of his neck. "But do not attempt to trick us, or I'll snap your neck like a rotten twig!"

"Better do as he says," Pomphis advised drily. "I think he means it."

Without further hesitation the chieftain complied. It was not long before the three were standing at the edge of the Bog of Bana-gui.

"There," Kimau said, pointing a trembling finger. "The girl is in there with the..."

Before the Rendille could finish speaking, Imaro's fingers closed convulsively about his throat. Frantically Kimau struggled to pry the Ilyassai's hands from his throat. But even the strength of desperation was as nothing against Imaro's fully-aroused might. Black death-shadows clouded the edges of Kimau's vision as he choked and gurgled unintelligible words of explanation to the snarling visage wavering dimly before his eyes. The crushing pressure against his windpipe was becoming too

painful to bear; with a weak gasp Kimau went limp...

Then, unaccountably, the pressure eased. Gratefully the Rendille gulped air into his tortured lungs, though each breath passed with searing pain through his agonized throat. Vaguely he heard the Bambuti shouting, "Not yet, Imaro! The jackal was trying to tell us something before you cut him off."

With a snarl of disgust, Imaro dropped the semi-conscious Rendille like a sack of excrement. Then he and Pomphis knelt over him as he struggled to regain his breath. A few moments passed; then Imaro's impatience asserted itself.

Jerking Kimau to a sitting position, Imaro demanded, "What more were you about to tell us of Tanisha?"

"Not...not dead," the Rendille gasped with great difficulty. "Gone to the Bana-gui."

"Liar!" Imaro roared. "How could anyone live in that bog?"

"The...the Bana-gui live...below. They take women from us to live among them."

Imaro demonstrated his disbelief by slamming the wretched Rendille back onto the ground. The impact knocked the man senseless.

"The lies of a dog desperate to save his miserable skin," Imaro commented as he pulled his sword out of its sheath. "Well, his will be the first blood in payment of a debt these Rendille owe me..."

"Wait," Pomphis said. "I can recall reading of 'Bana-gui' in a Cushite library. Can't recall exactly what it was... something about an ancient curse. I'll remember if I think long enough on it. But there's a way to test this man's claims. After all, if he's telling the truth, that means Tanisha is still alive. And if she's alive, there's still a chance to rescue her."

"What's your plan?" Imaro asked, slamming the sword back into its sheath. The thought that Tanisha was dead had left him momentarily mad; now he re-learned the wisdom of Pomphis' words.

"Very simple, actually," the pygmy said. "Just hold him under the surface of the bog for a while. Then drag him out. If he's still alive, then he was telling the truth. If not...well you would have killed him anyway, and to drown in the bog that killed Tanisha would be a just end for him."

After only a moment's consideration Imaro nodded approval at Pomphis' scheme. He even smiled a little, then he reached down and hoisted the Rendille chieftain as if he were weightless. Dangling Kimau at arm's length, the barbarian strode to the edge of the bog and deposited his burden feet-first into the gray

muck.

Still unconscious, Kimau sank slowly into the bog. As the Rendille descended, Imaro first bent, then knelt, and finally stretched full-length on the bank of the bog, all the while maintaining his grip on the neck of the chieftain's garment.

When the muck began to ooze into his nostrils, the Rendille's eyes flew open. Like Tanisha before him, he screamed and strained to lift his face above the surface. But Imaro impatiently shoved Kimau's head under and held it there.

The Ilyassai did not care for the sticky feel of the mire clinging to his arm, but he continued to hold Kimau's head under the surface. Suddenly he swore in surprise. A strange sensation was creeping along his arm, as if the substance of the bog were somehow being *pushed away* from it by some unknown force. Grimly Imaro maintained his hold, while Pomphis watched anxiously and strove to remember the significance of the words "Bana-gui".

After a time Imaro asked, "Do you think the dog's been under long enough?"

"Yes. Even your lungs could not last that long without air."

"Maybe he didn't have to," Imaro said. And he described the weird displacement of the muck he had experienced.

"What? Well what are you waiting for? Drag him up!"

This Imaro accomplished with a single jerk of his arm as he rose. Up surged Kimau's much-abused form, covered with redolent mire everywhere...except on his head. As Imaro lowered the chieftain to the ground, the man exhibited indisputable signs of life. His bony limbs thrashed feebly, and he was breathing heavily. His eyes were tightly shut, and his lips drew back from his teeth in a grimace of sheer dread.

"You were right," Imaro said. "Tanisha may still be alive. I'm going down there. Are you coming?"

"Of course," the Bambuti said with somewhat shaky bravado. Inside he was not quite so self-assured. The few tantalizing scraps he could recall about "Bana-gui" were associated with great horror. It was as if his normally eidetic memory had deliberately blocked from consciousness what he had learned of the subject during his studies under his mentor Khabatekh. And there was also Kimau's face...

Despite his ill-defined fears, Pomphis followed Imaro as the warrior waded into the bog. Hands resolutely clutching their weapons both men soon vanished beneath the viscous surface, leaving the Rendille chieftain to lie prostrate and moaning in the moonlight.

(iv)

Tanisha opened her eyes slowly, as if she were reluctant to believe she was not dead. Her vision was blurred; she could make out soft turquoise glow and several dark shapes nearby. She felt a sudden urge to breathe deeply. When she did, she found the air suffused with a strange but not unpleasant scent, like an agar from some unknown bloom.

Then she became aware of a dabbling motion along her limbs, as though her body were being cleansed. As her head continued to clear, Tanisha re-experienced the horror of the bog closing over her face and the subsequent blackness...and she shuddered at what she could not stop thinking of as the memory of her own death.

"She awakens," a feminine voice observed. This sudden intrusion of reality jolted Tanisha from her half-dream state. Looking upward, she found that she was staring into the face of a woman whose beauty was as rare as her own. Beneath a cap of kinky black hair, the woman's dark eyes regarded Tanisha impassively. Her short nose flared above a full-lipped, parted mouth. The burnt-umber shade of her skin was lighted oddly by the strange blue-green illumination.

"My life, which you have saved, is now yours," Tanisha said, automatically mouthing the words of the Old Codes. She was wary. Her experience with the Rendille had well prepared her for treachery.

"Your gratitude is not necessary," a male voice to her left responded. "You were never in danger of dying."

Tanisha turned her gaze to the new speaker. She saw two male faces, each a counterpart of the woman's in comeliness. But somehow these men's faces seemed too close together, as if their owners were leaning uncomfortably against one another...

Then she looked further downward, and her eyes widened in disbelief, and she screamed in shock at what she saw. For beneath the two heads was only one body! Fused side-by-side, the dual heads rested atop a single neck of bull-like thickness which in turn surrounded shoulders of unusual width. Two pairs of dark brown eyes sadly regarded the girl.

Perhaps it was the ironic juxtaposition of the handsomeness and deformity of the two-headed man that so discomfited Tanisha. Whatever the reason, she could bear to look at him no longer. She returned her attention to the woman who had first spoken to her... and could not scream past the gorge that choked her throat at the sight of her body...

The woman had a sapling-slim neck, soft brown shoulders, and a firm bosom. But beneath her naked breasts hung a *thing* which was even more horrible than the two-headed man; a thing that was a pair of shrivelled, misshapen legs and a single arm with clutching, clawlike fingers, all projecting from a bulbous mass of tissue bearing a vague resemblance to human buttocks. The legs stretched halfway down the woman's thigh, and even as Tanisha stared in morbid fascination, one of them kicked feebly, seemingly independent of the will of the body from which it sprouted.

Wildly Tanisha's eyes searched her surroundings for an avenue of escape. There was none. She was lying on a low bed in the center of a chamber of solid rock, the very walls of which glowed with the mysterious turquoise luminescence. The woman with the parasitic twin stood by the edge of the bed; the two-headed man was positioned between Tanisha and the arched entrance to the chamber. Perhaps she could have darted between the man and woman and reached the doorway, but the thought of inadvertently touching either of them revolted her.

Suddenly the limbs of the flesh-thing attached to the woman began to writhe and squirm with great agitation. Automatically the woman's hand reached down to stroke the buttock-like protuberance until the movements subsided.

"My 'sister' craves attention," she commented.

Tanisha whirled to the side of the bed and succumbed to her violent nausea. For several humiliating moments she spewed miserably. Then she forced herself to turn once again to the strangers.

"I am sorry," she began haltingly. "I..."

"There is no need to apologize," the woman said. "All who are sent here react similarly when they first see us. Long ago we wore robes and cloaks to conceal our bodies. Now...it does not matter."

Indeed, save for a round golden pendant hanging from her neck, the woman was completely nude, as was the man. He wore a similar pendant. Slowly Tanisha was coming to realize that other than their deformities, these people were not at all bad to look upon. Still, she had questions.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What do you mean by 'sent'? Did the Rendille know that the bog would not kill me? That I would end up in this place, whatever it is?"

"We will answer, as best we can," said the two-headed man. "I am Kalaam-Muchima, and the woman is called Kayinde. You are in the land of the Bana-gui."

With a slight shudder Tanisha noted that both of Kalaam-Muchima's mouths were speaking, each one saying alternate sentences.

"Bana-gui," she repeated, recalling the chant of the Rendille. "The Rendille knew I would end here, beneath the bog?"

"Of course. As I said, they sent you. Obviously, they did so because you are a stranger, and they wanted to spare one of their own this time."

"Why are people 'sent' here?" Tanisha persisted.

"That is a long tale, and must be told from its beginning," said Kalaam-Muchima.

"Longer ago than you can imagine, we Bana-gui were a mighty race, living in great cities that stood where zebras now roam and Rendille graze their goats. Then came the time of the Mizungu War, when the Mashataan led the white men of Atlantis against the men of Nyumbani, the Black Continent. With the aid of the Sky Walkers, Nyumbani drove the Mizungus back into the sea. But some there were who betrayed the Black Continent... who sided with the Mashataan. The Bana-gui were one of these traitor peoples."

Tanisha's skin crawled with a revulsion beyond any that could be occasioned by physical deformities. "You are creatures of the Mashataan?" she spat, contempt momentarily overcoming her fears.



"NOT WE!" both heads thundered simultaneously, sending Tanisha scurrying to the edge of the bed. "Our parents! It was *they* who succumbed to the promises of the Mashataan and their Naama Sorcerers. After the Atlanteans were driven out, the East Coast kingdoms combined to crush Bana-gui. The vindictive Cushite who led them so destroyed their cities that not a single stone remained to mark where they had stood. And the people...would that they, too had been obliterated!

"With spells of frightful potency the Cushite carved the very bowels of the earth beneath the forest-bog, and condemned the Bana-gui to subterranean exile. Still proud, the Bana-gui found food, built chambers in the caverns... and had children.

"We were those children. All of the women of Bana-gui gave birth to beings like ourselves. Deformities which occur but once in ten lifetimes were commonplace among the Bana-gui offspring. Our parents tried to kill us, but could not. Some subtle Cushite spell prevented their hands from carrying out the will of their hearts. When it became clear that every Bana-gui child was to be born a monster, many of our parents went mad. Others took their own lives. Still others did what they felt to be their duty; they raised the children and taught them how to survive in the caverns before they themselves died. They hated us... perhaps it was their hatred that killed them at last.

"We hated ourselves...you think Kayinde and I hideous, surface-woman? You have not seen the armless and legless ones...the ones with no faces...the ones with hides like that of a crocodile... the ones with the minds of infants... All these were slain as we fought savagely among ourselves and the others whose deep domains the Cushite's magic had disturbed. Far more horrible than we are these demons who dwell in the very rock of these caverns..."

"As the long years passed, we found that those of us who were not slain were immortal. This, then was the final curse of the Cushites: We, the children of the Bana-gui, must live forever in these loathsome forms unless slain by our own hands or by the demons of the rocks."

Listening to Kalaam-Muchima's doleful discourse, Tanisha experienced a change of heart toward the misbegotten Bana-gui, who measured their wretched lifetimes in centuries rather than years. But she still did not know why the Rendille had sent her to them, though a frightening suspicion was beginning to dawn. But she felt it wise to hear the Bana-gui out before yielding to her doubts.

"Why can you not go to the surface and seek the services of another sorcerer to undo the Cushite spell?" she asked.

"We thought of that many years ago," Kalaam-Muchima said. "The answer lies in yet another part of the curse. There is only one exit from these burrows; each time a Bana-gui approaches it, he is overcome by a paralyzing dread of entering it. In such a state, we are easy victims for the rock-demons..."

"Yet we are not without sorceries of our own. These golden discs are talismans of protection against the rock-demons. The light in the caverns is of our making. But our skills were hollow mockeries; of what use were they to a people with a hateful past and no future?

"Then came the Rendille with their goats and yams. At last there was hope for the Bana-gui! Though our own matings are barren, Kham-Yambuani, our king, believed that we could mate with normal humans and produce normal offspring...a new generation of Bana-gui free from the curse of our fathers!

"Thus we exerted our sorceries upon the Rendille...devised the ritual of the bog, but made certain the 'sacrifices' didn't die. At first, we took both men and women. But faced with our women, the men were men no longer. With the Rendille women, mating was...easier.

"And they *did* give birth. But they always died afterward...and they bore only monsters, each one the exact image of its father...We left the offspring for the rock-demons to devour. Our hopes dashed, most of us do little but dream in a state of lethargy. Few of us walk the burrows these days...but the Rendille still send us women, and some Bana-gui, such as Kayinde, Kham-Yambuani, and myself still dare to hope."

"Why haven't the Rendille taken their goats and left this country?" Tanisha asked, already knowing the answer to her other, unspoken question.

"They attempted it once," Kalaam-Muchima replied. "We sent them dreams which warned them that if they departed, their next generation of children would be born as we Bana-gui..."

"You could do that?" Tanisha shuddered.

"No. But they are foolish and craven enough to believe it. Yet if we could know the words of the Cushite curse, we could undo its effects...if not for ourselves, then for the children of the surface-women we mate with."

Then Kalaam-Muchima fell silent, and looked at Tanisha with a plea of desperation etched on his identical black faces.

"But you: you are a stranger," he said eagerly. "I sense a difference in you, a

vitality lacking in the women of the Rendille. Perhaps it can be through you that the dreams of the Bana-gui at last find fulfillment."

Tanisha turned her head from the four imploring eyes of Kalaam-Muchima. Her terror of the misshapen Bana-gui had subsided, to be replaced by something more akin to pity. This feeling had to a great extent reduced her repugnance of the sight of their abnormalities. She found herself wanting to help them.

Yet despite all this, she could not countenance the thought of intimate contact with the two-headed man, or anyone like him. She thought of Imaro, either dead or searching for her far aboveground. She could not betray her Ilyassai lover, who had so many times risked his life for her... Burying her face in her hands, Tanisha gasped, "I can't. I just can't..."

Suddenly a hard hand seized her shoulder and spun her onto her back. She let out a short cry at the contact of Bana-gui flesh against her skin, then covered her mouth with her hand. Kalaam-Muchima towered over her, eyes blazing with the fury of a millennium.

"You find the prospect unpleasant?" he/she said sardonically. "You need not be so concerned. You will be rendered unconscious and will have no recall of the mating. We have found that a better way, as in the past many Rendille women went mad when the mating-time came and attempted to slay either themselves or their partners.

"And I will not be the one with whom you mate, so you need not shrink from my touch. Your partner will be Kham-Yambuani himself, the greatest of us all."

Tanisha could not control an impulse to tremble violently. And she tried to drive from her mind disquieting speculations of just what standards Kalaam-Muchima employed to determine "greatness" ...

(v)

The silence that followed Kalaam-Muchima's words was suddenly broken by a low, eerie moan sounding outside the chamber. Tanisha's heart leaped; she knew that sound. Carefully she concealed her elation as Kayinde and Kalaam-Muchima wheeled toward the doorway entrance.

"That could not be a rock-demon," Kalaam-Muchima said tensely. "They would not dare venture into our area of the caverns. It must be some other intruder. But who? The Rendille have not the courage..."

"You'd better find out what it is, then," Kayinde suggested. "And rouse

the others. I will take care of our guest."

Nodding both his heads in agreement, Kalaam-Muchima strode hurriedly out of the chamber. Kayinde turned to Tanisha, and reached for a metal vial on a table next to the bed. The girl was lying curled in a position which Kayinde assumed to be pure terror.

"Drink this," Kayinde directed, holding the vial to the huddled surface-girl. "Please do not make me force you. Neither of us would like that."

For reply Tanisha uncoiled her body and struck straight as a spear. Her extended feet caught Kayinde on the point of her chin. Without a sound the Bana-gui woman crashed to the floor, where she lay unconscious. At least her own body lay still; her parasitic "sister" flailed wildly, motivated by mindless, primordial instinct.

Repelled by the bizarre sight, Tanisha nonetheless reached down and removed the pendant from Kayinde's throat, mindful of its protective qualities. As she looped it around her own neck, she recalled how Imaro had taught her the move she had used against Kayinde. Never had she expected to execute it so well.

Leaving the chamber, Tanisha heard a shout in the corridor, followed by a muffled thump. Appreciatively she wondered if the Bana-gui were as lethargic as Kalaam-Muchima had indicated. Then, as she stepped into a broad hall, she spotted a small form bending over a prone one.

"Pomphis!" she cried, rushing to the pygmy's side. "How did you get here? Where is Imaro?"

"We came the same way you did," the Bambuti replied, grimacing at his slimy garments. Hefting the glowing rock in his hands, he remarked, "I had to hit him on both heads to make sure he was out." Lying at Pomphis' feet was, of course Kalaam-Muchima.

"Where is Imaro?" Tanisha asked again, grabbing at Pomphis' arm.

"Somewhere in another corridor. We separated to make our search for you easier. Whoever found you first was to take you to the bog-entrance and wait for the other. But now that I've seen this inhabitant, I realize what this place is."

"I know about all that!" Tanisha interrupted impatiently. "Now let's get out of here and wait for Imaro. You lead the way; I was unconscious when they brought me here."

Hand in hand the pygmy and Tanisha walked through a corridor which seemed to stretch endlessly. It had a lofty, vaulted ceiling and its walls were pocked with arched entrance-ways at regular intervals. The turquoise glow cast curiously diffuse shadows as they walked, but this effect was ignored as

they watched warily for pursuers. There were none.

"I don't like this," Pomphis whispered. "Where are the people?"

"They sleep," Tanisha explained. "It is not likely that any will bother us; you stopped Kalaam-Muchima before he could raise an alarm."

The moment she stopped speaking, a dark, gigantic shape erupted from the archway closest to them. Both Tanisha and Pomphis stood rooted by the sheer monstrous impact of the sight that confronted their eyes. Then the shape took a step toward them, and Pomphis whipped out his dagger and leaped at his enemy. So quick was the pygmy's thrust that a less agile target might have been disembowled. But Pomphis' foe dodged the questing blade, and crashed a huge fist against the side of the pygmy's head, catapulting his child-sized body across the corridor. The Bambuti hit the floor, rolled, and lay still.

Tanisha was still transfixed as the Bana-gui turned toward her. Though Kham-Yambuani had never been described to her, she knew that the figure looming before her was he. Neither the pity she felt of the Bana-gui nor the poignant plea in their monarch's eyes could prevent her from screaming as his hands reached for her, and dragged her into a glowing rockhewn chamber...

(vi)

Imaro cursed low in his throat as he stalked the Bana-gui corridors in search of Tanisha. His anger had been building since he and Pomphis had sunk here through the bog. Though the magical air-bubbles had prevented them from suffocating, the descent had seemed endless through surroundings blacker than a moonless sky.

Their journey had ended in a trough of mire inclining toward the bottom of a huge cavern. By the muted light of the turquoise phosphorescence they had seen the two gaping entrances that led to the main corridors of Bana-gui. By hasty agreement, Imaro and Pomphis had separated, each taking a different entrance.

Prowling the empty corridors like a hunting lion, Imaro had seen nothing but empty doorways and heard only his own echoing footsteps. His heritage of life on the open savannah rebelled against the confinement of these subterranean surroundings, and fury smoldered in his breast. His sword was drawn to strike and slay, but no foe appeared.

Then he heard Tanisha's scream. Electrified, he rushed headlong toward its source. Senses honed by years of hunting in the wilderness guided him to the chamber of Kham-Yambuani. He

saw Pomphis lying crumpled against a wall. But as the pygmy was beginning to show signs of life, Imaro's attention was claimed by the sounds of struggle from the chamber.

But the moment he rushed through the entrance, the warrior halted abruptly, as if he had slammed into an invisible wall. His sword nearly slipped from suddenly-limp fingers as he gaped in mind-wrenched disbelief.

At the far end of the chamber stood a bed scaled beyond ordinary human dimensions. Across it lay Tanisha. Her eyes were screwed shut and her breasts heaved in labored gasps. Her arms were raised as if to ward off an attack and her long ebon legs were clamped tightly together. Tossing her head from side to side, she moaned, "I can't...I can't!"

But it was not Tanisha who inspired the horror etched on Imaro's broad features. It was Kham-Yambuani, who had bent to scoop up his weapons and was now advancing toward the Ilyassai. Instead of shifting into a fighting stance, the feet of Imaro seemed fused to the floor. Never had he seen the like of Kham-Yambuani...

From the abdomen down, Kham-Yambuani was normal in aspect. Though uncommonly massive, the legs were well-shaped and surged with power with each step Kham-Yambuani took. The waist was thick but not flabby, with wedges of iron muscle pushing against smooth black skin.

But at the point where a normal torso widens, from abdomen to chest, Kham-Yambuani's *divided!* Jutting from sharp angles were two chests, two sets of shoulders, two pairs of arms, and two heads!

Broad and swelling with sinew were the dual chests of Kham-Yambuani. His outer arms exceeded Imaro's own in musculature and girth. The inner arms were not so well-developed, as their development had been hindered by lack of space between the upper bodies.

The heads, noble of feature and form, surmounted columnar necks around which were looped the golden talismans of the Bana-gui. Crowning the heads were twin diadems winking with brilliant jewels. Despite the angle at which they leaned from his/their body, Kham-Yambuani's heads towered three inches above Imaro's.

Despite the rage now twisting their features, the faces of Kham-Yambuani had an almost godlike beauty, which, more than anything else, intensified the pathos of the malformed king of the Bana-gui.

But there was nothing pathetic about the weapons sprouting from Kham-Yambuani's fists. In his left hand rested a long, double-edged sword simi-

lar to Imaro's. A curiously curved blade tipped with a needle-sharp hook was gripped in his right. High above Kham-Yambuani's head rose an iron-headed mace wielded by both his/their inner hands.

As the misshapen monarch came closer to Imaro, his body's various limbs and appendages worked in perfect coordination despite the separate brains guiding them. Centuries of patience had gone into this incredible feat of physical self-mastery.

It was only when Kham-Yambuani had advanced within striking range that Tanisha's voice shattered the horrid fascination that was holding him fast.

"Imaro! Don't kill him," she cried, fear flooding her dark eyes. "He didn't mean to harm me..."

"Kill us?" roared the heads of Kham-Yambuani. "With only one weapon and two hands? No! This intruder will not interfere with the consummation of the destiny of the Bana-gui!"

With frightening speed all three of Kham-Yambuani's weapons whistled through the air and converged on the space occupied by Imaro. Like a blacksmith's hammer the mace smashed toward the Ilyassai's head, while the bladed weapons arced lethally at his sides.

But Imaro was no longer a frozen, stationary target. Swiftly he raised his sword to parry the mace blow. The weapons met with a clangorous impact that shivered the warrior's sword-arm. A shift of his body, and the Bana-gui's sword slid harmlessly past Imaro's stomach. But before he could leap away from the third weapon, its hook gouged his ribs, and blood began to trickle down his side.

Still Kham-Yambuani paused, mouths gaping in amazement. Another man would have fallen instantly at his/their attack, head crushed and body skewered by the three simultaneous blows. But Imaro had survived with but a single wound, and instead of retreating further, he aimed a straight thrust at Kham-Yambuani's midsection.

Slashing savagely, Kham-Yambuani parried Imaro's point with his hooked blade. With a practiced twist of his wrist, the Bana-gui nearly succeeded in wrenching Imaro's sword from his grasp. As the Ilyassai pulled back his blade, Kham-Yambuani's mace barely missed his head, and the point of his sword flashed dangerously close to his eyes. Again Imaro's agility saved him as he yanked his head aside and danced out of range of another mace-blow.

"See how he flees, Brother," boasted Kham-Yambuani's left head. "But he cannot run forever. He will tire, this puny man of the surface; then we will

make of him food for the rock-demons!"

And the Bana-gui king pressed his attack, moving with great quickness for his bulk. Imaro responded fearlessly; once the battle had begun, his awe of Kham-Yambuani had been swept away in a tide of barbaric bloodlust. On his face was a fighting-man's snarl, and his eyes blazed with untamed ferocity as he met the Bana-gui's juggernaut rush.

In a hurricane of steel, Kham-Yambuani showered blows at his seemingly-disadvantaged foe. Elusive as a ghost, Imaro evaded many lethal strokes by shifting and twisting his body at such lightning speed that he was like an insubstantial black blur. Nor was his blade idle. Deftly it blunted scores of blows and threaded the Bana-gui's web of steel like a needle of death. The unparalleled battle-prowess of the Ilyassai warrior-tradition had been imparted to Imaro; this was its ultimate test...

Then the tide of combat subsided momentarily as the antagonists eyed each other with increased wariness, if not respect. Imaro's body was slick with sweat, and blood dripped from several small wounds. Kham-Yambuani was also sweat-streaked, and there were places on his bifurcated body which ran with crimson.

Kham-Yambuani had fought and defeated rock-demons as well as a succession of Bana-gui grotesques even more misshapen than himself. But never before had he met a foe like Imaro: implacable, fearless, powerful. The two diademed heads glanced at each other, and for the first time in centuries doubt flickered in their eyes.

"He is only a man," sneered the right-side lips.

"And we are immortal," said the ones on the left. "We are a god!"

Again shouting, "WE ARE A GOD!" Kham-Yambuani closed with Imaro, who had been silently recuperating expended strength.

Despite his brief respite, the barbarian seemed to falter before Kham-Yambuani's renewed attack. Lessening in force, his swordstrokes were no longer penetrating the Bana-gui's guard.

Then a glancing blow of the mace struck Imaro's head with enough force to drive him to his knees. Contemptuously disdaining the use of his bladed weapons, Kham-Yambuani roared in triumph and raised the mace high above his head. Down came the massive iron ball in a final skull-shattering smash... and at the last possible instant, Imaro's sword whipped upward in a deadly semi-circle, slicing entirely through the wrists of the hands gripping the mace!

Twin gouts of gore spattered the walls of the cavern as Kham-Yambuani bellowed in pain and stumbled back-

ward. Four bulging eyes stared in shock at the scarlet-sputting stumps of the Bana-gui's inner arms. Imaro's eyes had detected that single brief moment when the Bana-gui's multi-limbed torso was off-balance, and had taken advantage of the opening...

Taking advantage of Kham-Yambuani's confusion, Imaro seized the fallen mace and lithely gained his feet. He ignored the severed hand still clutching its handle as he stalked toward the reeling ruler of Bana-gui.

"We're even now, 'God,'" Imaro grated, speaking for the first time. "My two arms against yours."

Stung by the Ilyassai's taunt, Kham-Yambuani's faces altered from grimaces of agony to masks of rage. "With your head you will pay for the loss of these hands, intruder!" the right head cried.

"The rock-demons will feast upon your living bones," promised the left.

Imaro's reply was a vicious swipe of the mace which, had it landed, would have smeared Kham-Yambuani's left face into a crimson ruin. But with a dexterity perfected over ten centuries, Kham-Yambuani met the blow with his hooked weapon. Engaging the hook at the juncture of the mace's ball and handle, the Bana-gui succeeded in wrenching the weapon from Imaro's hand. The mace sailed across the room and rattled along the floor, Kham-Yambuani's hand still clinging to it in a macabre death-grip.

Short-lived was the Bana-gui's regained advantage. In the next brutal exchange of whirling steel, Imaro's sword broke the blade of Kham-Yambuani's hooked weapon. Only a useless shard of steel remained attached to the hilt.

Again the odds had evened. The Bana-gui had lost two of three weapons, while Imaro retained his blood-stained sword. No longer did the Ilyassai dance outside the range of his opponent's blade; he plied his sword at close quarters. The labored breathing of two sets of lungs rasped raggedly in Imaro's ears as he sought an opening for a killing blow. Imaro was also tiring, but he had in no way reached the limits of his endurance.

Neither had Kham-Yambuani, whose body contained the strength of two men. Now the power of the Bana-gui was surging anew as his sword slithered past Imaro's defense and carved a crimson signature across the Ilyassai's breast. Fresh blood spilled down the barbarian's body to mingle with that of Kham-Yambuani on the cold stone floor.

The momentum from Kham-Yambuani's last slash left an opening at his vulnerable weaponless right side. In-

stantly shifting to a double-handed grip, Imaro threw all his strength into a single sweeping arc. The still air of the cavern hummed with the force of the swing as the Ilyassai's blade sheared through the thick neck of Kham-Yambuani's right head. With a grimace of incredulity frozen on its features the head leaped from the Bana-gui's shoulders. A jet of hot scarlet gore shot ceilingward as the huge body staggered in agony.

Snneking curses as old as the caverns themselves, Kham-Yambuani's right head was powerless to prevent his suddenly-limp left leg from collapsing beneath him. As the Bana-gui crashed heavily to the floor, Imaro was upon him, death blazing from his inflamed eyes. But before the Ilyassai could drive his blade into Kham-Yambuani's chest, a treetrunk leg shot upward, slamming a wide foot into Imaro's midsection. Now it was Imaro's turn to fall. The back of his head cracked hard against the cavern floor, leaving him stunned and senseless.

Grimly Imaro struggled to cling to consciousness as a bleeding bulk rose to tower before his dizzied vision. Dimly he heard a voice shout, "Mine! After all these centuries of damnable sharing, this mishapened body is *mine alone!*"

Then the bulk lurched laboriously toward him, carefully placing one huge foot before the other. Kham-Yambuani's sword flashed in the bluish half-light as Imaro strove to shake away the mists clouding his mind. Kham-Yambuani's leg-muscles tensed for his final lunge. The Bana-gui monarch ignored the blood fountaining from the stump beside his remaining head. Onward he came, a ghastly parody of a normal man with one head and two arms...

With a bellow of built-up hatred, Kham-Yambuani dove at the supine form of Imaro. A scream split the stillness of the cavern as the Bana-gui's sword descended. Then the huge maimed body landed heavily on Imaro's...and sprouted a stem of crimsoned steel from the middle of its broad back. Somehow Imaro had managed to avoid Kham-Yambuani's blade and lift his own to meet the Bana-gui's diving charge.

Like levers of cabled steel Imaro's arms shoved the huge corpse from him. Then the Ilyassai hauled himself upright and wrenched his weapon from the body of Kham-Yambuani. Still unsteady on his feet, the warrior turned to Tanisha.

Still lying on the oversized bed, the Kahutu girl was looking at the dead king. In death he was hideous as he had never been in life. There was sorrow in Tanisha's eyes; tears trickled down her black-velvet cheeks.

Near Tanisha stood Pomphis who had recovered from Kham-Yambuani's blow. But the impact seemed still to be affecting him, for he was staring blankly past the Ilyassai.

Suddenly Tanisha was in Imaro's arms, pressing close like a lost child. Her tears mingled with the blood running down his chest. Cupping her chin in one huge hand, the Ilyassai asked, "Did he hurt you?"

"No," Tanisha replied. "He meant me no harm. He only wanted my...help. But I could not give it to him." Again she buried her face in the warrior's breast.

Imaro chose not to understand her meaning.

Then he heard a small sound behind him. And he knew that he and his companions were not alone in the chamber of Kham-Yambuani.

(vii)

His battle with Kham-Yambuani had to an extent injured Imaro to the sight of the Bana-gui king's deformity. But when he turned and looked upon the assemblage of Bana-gui who had quietly come into the chamber during the struggle, his skin crawled and his stomach shot bile into his throat. Never had he even imagined such congenies of the grotesque...

In the forefront of the crowd were Kayinde and Kalaam-Muchima. Behind them were gathered the last remnants of the once-mighty Bana-gui...no more than fifty immortals, warped of body and limb.

There were some who shared Kayinde's affliction of atrophied, parasitic twins growing from their chests or stomachs. Supernumerary heads like that of Kalaam-Muchima sprouted from foreheads, necks, and shoulders. One such secondary head rested face-up atop the crown of its primary, to stare forever at the ceilings of the caverns. There were some who bore one or more legs dangling from enlarged pelvises, and some with gnarled hands growing from the juncture of arm and shoulder, clutching spasmodically at empty air. Some were separate individuals whose flesh was fused at hip or thigh, or were joined by ligatures of muscle tissue. There were women with three and four pairs of breasts marching down their torsos, and a man whose heart beat rhythmically outside his chest. The macabre variety of their deformities represented mute testimony to the full horror of the ancient Cushite curse.

Though no two Bana-gui had identical afflictions, at that moment they were united by the blazing glares of hatred they were directing at Imaro and the weapons held tightly in their fists.

"You have slain our ruler, intruder. For that you must die," promised Kalaam-Muchima.

"No Mashataan scum steals my woman!" Imaro roared, shaking his sword so vigorously that droplets of gore flew in the faces of the Bana-gui. Though his fight with Kham-Yambuani had tired him, Imaro still exuded a grim, savage aura of defiance and indomitability.

"Mashataan?" Kalaam-Muchima echoed incredulously. "You think we are *Mashataan?*" He/they and many other Bana-gui spat on the ground.

"The Mashataan made you as you are?" Imaro demanded, a sudden insight altering his attitude. He was well aware that at the Mashataan, through their minions the Naamans, were evidently capable of such a heinous act.

"No. We are victims of a curse cast by the Cushites."

Imaro snorted in disbelief. But before he could lash out further, Pomphis laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"It's true, my friend," the pygmy said. "If there'd been time, I would have told you the tale of the Bana-gui..."

"What do you know of Bana-gui, intruder?" cried a man whose four fists shook with passion. "Are you a Cushite? Are you a keeper of their damnable curse? What do you know of those whom we hate even more than the Mashataan?"

The last was shouted in a rising pitch of hysteria. Only sharp words from Kalaam-Muchima prevented the man from hurling himself upon the trio of outsiders.

Then Pomphis stepped forward, spurning the protection of Imaro's sword. He began to speak, choosing his meaning carefully, for he realized that at this juncture their chances of leaving these caverns alive depended more upon his tongue than Imaro's blade.

"Am I a Cushite?" he began rhetorically. "Not by birth. My heritage lies in the jungles of the Ituri Kubwa. But my heart and soul are Cushite."

"Then let your Cushite heart feed the rock-demons and your Cushite soul rot in hell!" Kalaam-Muchima challenged, stepping forward threateningly. He was met by the extended point of Imaro's sword.

"Hear him out, you who are already in a hell of your own," the Ilyassai muttered.

Kalaam-Muchima stepped back. He and the other Bana-gui were well aware that a man who could slay Kham-Yambuani could also mow many of his people down before their superior numbers finally overcame him. It would do no harm to listen to the pygmy's words while formulating a strategy to bring the Ilyassai down with minimal losses to

themselves.

"If it were true that it is the will of the people of Cush that you children of the Bana-gui suffer as you have, I would burn my scholar's skullcap, tear away these linen garments, and return to the land of my ancestors. But the curse was placed upon you not by a nation but by one man only: Taharqa the Pitiless, he who broke the power of the Mizungus by calling forth the Sky Walkers who rid the earth of the Mashataan."

"Did this Taharqa live a thousand years, as we have?" a three-legged Bana-gui demanded. "If not, why then have his descendants not freed us from these burrows and removed the curse?"

"Taharqa was not immortal, it is true," Pompilis went on, speaking as if he had actually witnessed the events of a millennium past, rather than having gleaned his knowledge from scores of Cushite tomes.

"So much of himself did he give to call down the Sky Walkers that he ended only a withered, half-alive husk. Taharqa died soon after his final series of punishments to the traitors to the cause of Nyumbani, of whom your ancestors were only one group. As the centuries passed, the rulers of Cush eventually presumed that the victims of Taharqa's curses died out. Like Taharqa, they believed that self-destruction would be preferable to immortality under the... conditions of his spells.

"Tanisha has told me something of your lives. One thousand years of this hideous existence! When I return to Meroe, I will petition the High Council of Cush to remove the curse from your people. I know they will do so. Were it in my power, I would do it myself."

Kalaam-Muchima and the others laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. "You expect us to believe that a Cushite sorcerer would descend these depths and recite in reverse the words of the spell binding us here? As soon would the cheetah lie down with the gazelle!"

"Repeat it backwards?" Pompilis echoed. "Is that all that's necessary to undo the spell?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Kalaam-Muchima. "We have gained much of arcane knowledge over the centuries, and are certain that is the answer. Are you, then, a sorcerer?" he asked, hope flaring in both pairs of eyes.

"I'm afraid not," the Bambuti replied regretfully. "I have studied the lore of thaumaturgy extensively, but my mentor was killed before he could teach me how to apply my knowledge.

"But I still may be able to help you. You see, I know the curse of Taharqa word for word. I have the ability to memorize every word I read, much as my forest brethren make themselves

(continued on next page.)

Michael Moorcock Thanks for the latest FANTASY CROSSROADS (13) which I think is in most ways your best yet, for variety of material, both written and drawn, and for quality.

Paul Allen's stuff on my s&s books was very flattering. I'd completely forgotten I'd written a story for ELDRITCH DREAM QUEST! If you know anyone who has a copy I'd happily pay for a xerox and postage. I'm a bit bad about keeping copies of stuff, which is why I can't confirm or deny any of Paul's speculation about TARZAN ADVENTURES. I gave most of my copies away to kids years ago. I had to borrow the SCIENCE FANTASY copies of stories when I was revising the Elric stories for DAW. But I would like to see that 1960 story. About the Burroughs pastiches (Kane), although I agree they're not very good, they were deliberate parodies of Burroughs and the third book was an exercise in that I took a Burroughs hero and deliberately ran him through a series of adventures in which he acted according to John Carter's code—which meant he couldn't attack anyone, he had to keep retreating through the series (the last book in particular) because none of the apparent villains could be blamed for what they were. The satirical aspects of the series are apparent in some of the names, for instance, such as The Caves of Gordelpus. I make no claims for the level of the parody, I hasten to add. AVILION ran the early parts of *The Eternal Champion* stuff I wrote in 1956 when I was 16, but the fanzine never got off the ground. The stencils were done and a few pages run off which were stapled, finally, but I never did the magazine I'd planned and the ramshackle AVILION died the death. I still retained other stencils which I didn't run off but I lost the lot. A few copies went out. I suppose someone has one somewhere, but I don't have any of my old fanzines at all (there are a few, I believe, in The Bodleian Library, but I've no idea what). ETERNAL CHAMPION was the first book-length thing I ever planned. There is a manuscript presumably somewhere of around 150-200 pages of material which never went into the SCIENCE FANTASY version, but God knows what happened to it. There was another novel done a little later called THE HUNGRY DREAMERS which has also been lost. The third novel I

attempted (in 1958) has been found—by Dave Britton and Mike Butterworth who did the SOJAN book—and will be published next year, THE GOLDEN BARGE. Why am I waffling on.

Anyway, thanks again for the issue. I thought Barbara Stitt's 'Sleeping' was very fine indeed. A great pleasure to see genuinely good drawing anywhere these days.

It came into my mind that, for the record, I ought to say something about "The Last Enchantment," the Elric story recently published in ARIEL 3. This story was written about March 1962 and was intended for Ted Carnell but Ted didn't want to publish a short—he wanted me to write a novel. So I began on STORMBRINGER. "The Last Enchantment" was meant to be the last Elric story! Ted's SCIENCE FANTASY folded with the last part of STORMBRINGER and I assumed the story lost. I believe Ted had had some intention of marketing it in the US—but assume he lost it, too. It didn't turn up again until last year when Leslie Flood, who took over Ted's agency, found it in a cupboard and returned it to me. It was a stroke of luck, since I'd promised ARIEL something in that line. I sent it to them and, in time, they published it. Therefore, although it was the last published Elric story it falls before STORMBRINGER and after "The Flame Bringers" in terms of when it was written. It's just possible that it was written before "Kings in Darkness" and "The Flame Bringers," given the date of writing (which I remember very clearly because of certain personal associations)—because I hadn't really intended the series to go on as long as it did. "Kings in Darkness" was partially based on a plot by Jim Cawthorn, originally intended as a Conan story, and I'm inclined to feel that it doesn't quite fit the rest of the series. By that time there was a demand for more stories which I had been unprepared for and "Kings" didn't properly mature in my head, in my view—whereas "The Flame Bringers" was a 'proper' Elric story (the title lifted, incidentally, from an historical short story about the Goths written for THE SEARCHLIGHT BOOK FOR BOYS!) to which I and various other frequenters of The Globe contributed since the editor was an sf fan who commissioned short stories from us—how's that for useless information!)

familiar with every leaf in the Ituri Kub-wa."

A hum of excitement arose among the Bana-gui. Dared they hope that after ten centuries of ensorcelled entombment this muck-daubed pygmy could offer an end to their sufferings?

Kalaam-Muchima, whom Pomphis correctly assumed to be a person of some renown among the Bana-gui, seemed unimpressed. Still he directed: "Bring writing materials. The small one will write out the words of the Cushite spell. I, as the foremost sorcerer among us, will recite the reverse of the spell. If the curse is lifted from us, we will in gratitude lead the strangers out of our caverns. If the small one's words are false, all three strangers will die."

"We will not die alone," promised Imaro as a multiple-breasted woman brought Kalaam-Muchima a scroll of gleaming, parchment-like substance

The Bana-gui listened intently to the staccato syllables echoing through the chamber of their dead king. Imaro gathered his strength, which had been taxed but not exhausted in his battle against Kham-Yambuani. He suspected that even if Pomphis' counterspell did prove effective, he and his companions might still have to fight their way out of the blue-lit burrows.

Abruptly Kalaam-Muchima was done. A tense, anticipatory silence hung almost palpably in the great cavern as the Bana-gui waited, all eyes focused on the two-headed enchanter.

Then a collective shudder swept like a wave over the Bana-gui. Ecstasy kindled like celebrant flames in their eyes as they lifted their arms in joy.

"It is gone!" cried Kalaam-Muchima. "After a thousand years the Cushite curse is gone. Do you feel it, brothers and sisters? Do you feel it? We are free!"

"Do you feel it? We are free! After a thousand years the Cushite curse is gone."

and a curiously-carved stylus. The warrior glared ferally at the mass of Bana-gui who blocked the chamber's only exit. If Pomphis failed, Imaro thought, then he would risk all in a sudden whirlwind plunge into the Bana-gui ranks. Perhaps Tanisha and Omphis could escape in his bloody wake.

Holding out the scroll and stylus to Pomphis, Kalaam-Muchima instructed: "Write in the language of the East Coast...if you can."

Silently the Bambuti accepted the materials and unrolled the scroll. It was thinly coated with the same glowing veneer that lit the cavern walls. With the stylus Pomphis scratched the angular characters of the East Coast script onto the glowing parchment. The writing looked like dark runes surrounded by demure.

While Pomphis wrote, Tanisha glanced fleetingly at Kayinde, who as always stood at the side of Kalaam-Muchima. She flinched at the accusation in the Bana-gui woman's eyes.

With a final flourish, Pomphis completed his task. With an eagerness befitting his surface skepticism, Kalaam-Muchima snatched the scroll from the pygmy's hands. He began pronouncing the words in reverse, starting at the end of the spell. Each of Kalaam-Muchima's mouths read alternate words, lending an eerie stereophony to his/their chant.

Free to ascend to the surface and sire a new generation of Bana-gui who will once again raise proud towers to the sky. Free to see the sun for the first time. Free to..."

Kalaam-Muchima never completed his paean to liberation. For the full, unexpected effects of the counterspell were rapidly becoming apparent. The component of the curse which had immortalized them was gone; ten centuries of deferred aging was attacking their bodies like a swarm of soldier ants. They did not suddenly grow old; the time involved in normal aging was but a fraction of their unnaturally-prolonged lives. Instead, the horrified eyes of the three onlookers witnessed an abrupt desiccation, an eldritch implosion of flesh instantly reduced to dust which drifted through the bones of grotesque skeletons which in turn collapsed into low piles of whitish powder in the midst of which weapons and circular pendants gleamed in seeming mockery of their owners' betrayed aspirations. Even the corpse of Kham-Yambuani was dust at Imaro's feet.

So quickly had the horror occurred that there had been no time for its witnesses to turn their heads or shut their eyes against the sight. Now the stunned surface-dwellers were all that remained alive in the caverns of the Bana-gui...

Or were they?

(viii)

Tears still flowed down the face of Tanisha as she helped Pomphis apply bindings to Imaro's wounds. Pomphis had told her that she should not weep for the Bana-gui. "I sensed in them the same lust for power that had led to their parents' downfall," the Bambuti had observed. But Pomphis had not seen the pleading in their eyes, Tanisha thought to herself.

"These are only scratches," Imaro growled as Tanisha tore another strip from Pomphis' rapidly-disappearing garment. Since Imaro was wearing only a loincloth and Tanisha nothing, the pygmy was forced to contribute his Cushite linen to staunch the seepage of the warrior's blood.

Suddenly the Ilyassai stood up. "Enough of this wasting of time! We should be getting out of this hellhole."

As if to underscore the Ilyassai's words a tremor suddenly shook the glowing walls of the cavern. The tremor did not last long, but was powerful enough to shake the dustpiles that were all that remained of the burrows late inhabitants.

"You're right," Pomphis agreed. "These caverns are not natural. The wizardry that held up the walls all this time has vanished."

"You're sure you know the way out of here, Pomphis?" Tanisha asked as they exited Kham-Yambuani's chamber and hurried down the corridor.

"Of course I do. There was a detailed diagram of these caverns in the same book that contained Taharqa's spell. I memorized both."

"I hope we aren't the ones to end up as dustpiles this time." Imaro commented. He was wary of the often unpredictable consequences of the pygmy's erudition.

Following Pomphis' lead the wayfarers threaded the labyrinthine burrows. Tremors of ever increasing magnitude seemed to pursue them as they trusted the Bambuti's eidetic memory to lead them to the single unction shaft that led to the surface. Their flight was spurred by the sound of rock falling behind them.

After what seemed like endless twistings and turnings and near-collisions at sharp bends in the rock, they finally reached their destination: a circular cavity yawning like a black mouth in the blueness of the cavern wall. Seldom had they seen a more ominous-looking escape route. For a moment they hesitated. Then a powerful shock shuddered through the burrows, flinging the wanderers from their feet and loosening fragments of rock from the walls and ceiling.

As they scrambled to their feet, Tanisha suddenly screamed and pointed it at the opening. From the luminescent stone surrounding it, a shape was forming; a shape imbued with malevolent life, extruding and coalescing from the very substance of the rock itself...

"A rock-demon!" Tanisha cried. "The spells must have disturbed it..."

Now the rock-demon had fully formed, and stood solidly in front of the exit while the earth quaked beneath their feet. More than anything else the creature resembled an arachnid grown to monstrous proportions. Eight feet it towered from the cave-floor, and its chitinous body was over twenty feet in length. From its blue bulk projected a score of hairy spider-like limbs. The hanging abdomen was joined to the thorax by an incredibly thin tube of armored tissue. Five crimson compound eyes spattered the bulbous head like drops of blood, glowing as if lit by intelligence of unspeakable origin. Beneath its waving antennae its barbed mouth worked sidewise while the chelae projecting beneath the jaws snapped dangerously close to three wide-staring black faces. An aortal chittering filled the burrow as the rock-demon crawled forward.

"Run past it!" yelled Imaro. "I'll hold it off as long as I can."

But neither Pompis nor Tanisha budged as Imaro forgot his wounds and sprang toward the rock-demon. Gripping his sword in both hands, the barbarian slashed at the juncture of head and thorax. The blade bit a fraction of an inch into the chitin, then rebounded, throwing Imaro off-balance.

With serpentine speed, the demon's chelae flashed out and seized Imaro by the arms. Cutting deep into the warrior's arm the pincers lifted him high and dragged him toward the gnashing maw. Imaro's sword slipped from his fingers and he bellowed in pain as the chelae cut yet deeper into his arms.

Hearing that cry, Pompis trembled in fresh terror, for he knew that only agony beyond normal endurance could have torn such a sound from his friend's throat. Still the warrior fought on. Biting back further outcries, he planted his feet beneath two of the demon's eyes and clutched the stalks of the chelae with his hands. Though the Ilyassal's legs were bent at the knee, the rock-demon was unable to draw Imaro any closer to its deadly mandibles as fresh tremors shook the earth.

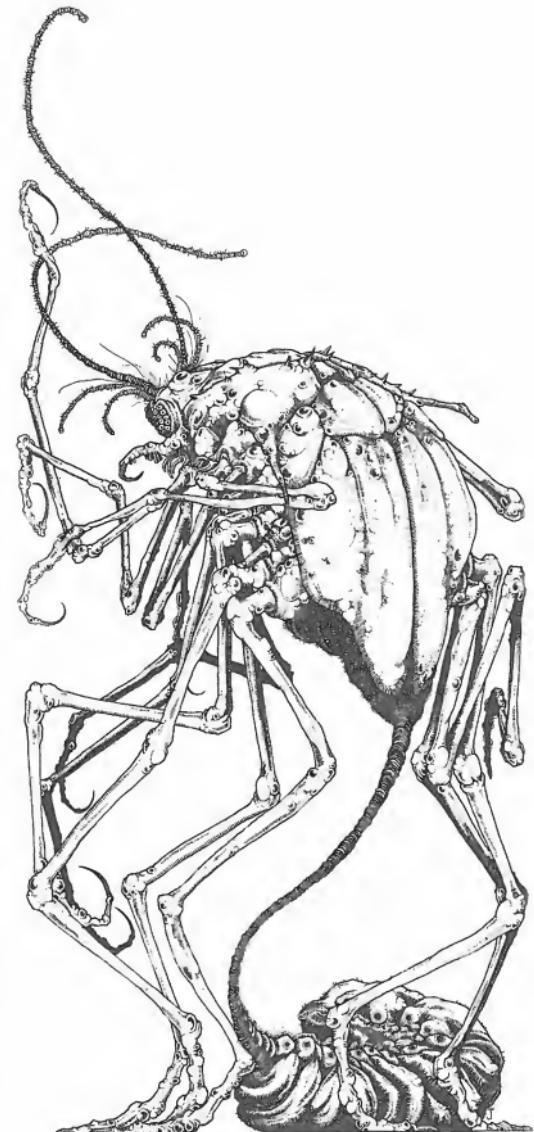
Then, in an explosive burst of power Imaro straightened his legs while holding fast to the chelae. With a sudden tearing of insectoid tissue, the pincers were pulled out at the roots, precipitating Imaro to the floor. The demon's chittering became an ear-splitting shriek of rage and pain as it launched itself at the prostrate warrior.

Imaro struggled frantically to regain his feet as the rock-demon loomed like a giant bloated spider above him. Heavily it landed on his back, seeking to crush Imaro into the stony floor. But the Ilyassal's legs held like trunks of ironwood as he bore the full enormous weight of the rock-demon. Imaro was bent nearly double, but his great thews stood out in bold relief as he resisted the rock-demon's efforts to break his back. Sweat streamed down his body with the strain of maintaining his balance as the earth shifted and quaked beneath his feet.

Watching their comrade's struggles through a cage of hairy black limbs, Pompis and Tanisha seemed helpless to aid him. But they refused to desert him, though it seemed inevitable that even Imaro's superhuman strength would soon fail and he would be crushed by the inexorable bulk of the rock-demon.

Then Tanisha remembered the golden Bana-gui disc dangling between her breasts...

With a cry like a lioness, Tanisha yanked the yellow chain from her neck and started toward Imaro and the rock-demon. Pompis, thinking that her passion for her warrior-lover had



driven Tanisha mad, attempted to hold her back. But in a frenzy she bowed the pygmy over and squeezed between two of the stalklike legs. Though her skin crawled at the touch of the spiderly hairs, she still made her way to Imaro.

In frantic haste she worked the talisman between Imaro's flattened hand and the demon's underbelly. Then she scurried back through what seemed like a forest of gigantic insect-legs. As she emerged, Pomphis met her and half-carried her out of range of the rock-demon's flailing limbs. As full awareness of the risk she had taken sank into her consciousness, Tanisha's body trembled as violently as the walls of the cavern.

At the touch of the golden talisman, the rock-demon recoiled as if it had been seared by flame. At that moment Imaro threw all his remaining strength into a final muscle-cracking surge against the creature's oppressive weight...and the immense spider-thing toppled onto its side. Floundering in an attempt to rise, the rock-demon rolled itself onto its back instead. Its legs flailed ineffectually as Imaro, swaying drunkenly on the trembling floor, retrieved his sword.

Imaro's back ached as though he had just supported the weight of the moon. But somehow he found the energy to loop the talisman around his sword so that it was attached to the point. Then he staggered to the head of the rock-demon. Mandibles clashing futilely, the creature's head swiveled toward Imaro. Perhaps a glimmer of fear flashed through its soulless scarlet eyes before Imaro drove his weapon deep into its brain...

Reinforced by the power of the Bana-gui talisman, the sword made a smoking ruin of the rock-demon's head. Pale ichor seeped into an ill-smelling pool around it. Its body stopped moving and lay stiff as the stone that had spawned it.

Above all else, Imaro wanted to sink to the floor himself and rest. He had finally reached the limit of his endurance, and his new wounds were weakening him even further. But there was no time to rest. The crashing and rumbling of the cave-in was drawing closer, and the ground danced beneath his feet.

"Run Now!" he shouted to Tanisha and Pomphis as he snatched up a chunk of glowing cave-rock. Using its wan light as a guide, they stumbled up the stygian shaft. On several occasions they were hurled headlong by the shifting earth. Each time this happened, they helped each other to their feet and staggered onward.

At last they saw a patch of dim gray light growing before them. Spurred by the sight, they ran recklessly over the

rough ground until they literally fell out into open air only seconds before the shaft collapsed behind them...

EPILOG

Rain fell in a warm mist, obscuring the morning sun. In the distance a herd of elephants loomed like a procession of dim gray monoliths, trumpeting as they ambled through the tall grass. Bands of zebra and gnu scampered out of the pachyderms' path.

Not far from the animals was the mound that marked the shaft leading to the Bana-gui burrows. The mound also lay within sight of the village of the Rendille.

Three people who were not of the Rendille sat near the mound recovering from an entire harrowing night spent in the caverns which were no more. Imaro sat with his head down and his arms resting across his knees. Gratefully he allowed the gentle rain to wash away the blood and pain of his wounds. Leaning against him was Tanisha, whose head rested wearily on his broad shoulder. In Tanisha's lap was the head of Pomphis.

Typically it was the pygmy who broke the silence.

"Perhaps we should inform the Rendille that they no longer need to send their surplus females to the Bana-gui."

"No," Imaro said sharply. "Let them learn for themselves. Chances are the jackals will dump the last woman of their tribe into that cursed bog before they find out there's no more need. I won't trouble to kill any of them myself; their own cowardice will provide vengeance enough."

After that uncharacteristically long speech, Imaro sank into a brooding silence. Suddenly he rose and walked toward the rubble-filled opening from which they had so narrowly escaped. Tanisha followed, and they stood with their arms about each other. They spoke for a while, then gazed silently at the mound.

"You should not be so downcast," Pomphis said as he joined them. "After all, even you have not often slain two monsters in one night."

"Only one was a monster," Imaro said. "The other was a man."

THE END

MIRACLE IN A BOTTLE by W. Paul Ganley

Friends and persons lyrical,
Scribes in poet's mask—
I have for you a miracle
in this exotic flask.
A dictionary liquidous,
A sparkling Roget;
No memory ubiquitous
Can match this wizard's way.

A versifier's mockery
A critic's cruel spite,
A realist's daring shockery,
A Cleopatran night;
A poet's vibrant bubbles
(Sorrows sheathed in silk)—
Are such defects your troubles?
Then sup my genius-milk.

I'll give it to you gladly,
This stuff of poet kings:
Though you have written badly,
My brew will better things.

But when you've lived your while
You'll yield your soul to me
I'll trap it in another phial
And lend it willingly.



THE CREATOR MEDITATES by H. Warner Munn

On another planet, near another sun,
Genesis—without Man—has again
begun,
That sad mistake now rectified.
This blissful haven—to him denied—
This later Garden—this fair creation—
Shall not suffer from his imagination.
All else is as it was before—
And yet—that other Eden pleased Me
more.

Ghor, King-Slayer

A ROUND-ROBIN TALE BASED UPON A
ROBERT E. HOWARD FRAGMENT

SYNOPSIS BY JONATHAN BACON

Ghor is born with a crooked limb and abandoned by his parents to the icy wastes. They have four strong sons and do not desire a cripple. After being raised by the grey wolves of the icy North, Ghor learns of his parents' betrayal and ruthlessly slaughters his mother, father and four elder brothers.

Ythillin, first daughter of the ice gods, appears to Ghor carrying a prophecy from the gods and her own curse. For the slaughter of his family, Ghor is consigned to danger and strife for all his days and the Ice Witch further declares that he'll never sire children to aid him in old age or carry on his lineage.

Her message from the gods is that Ghor will save a civilization from destruction and place an Aesir king on the throne. Halmar, a young Aesir warrior is also visited by the Ice Witch and directed to meet Ghor. The two warriors take over leadership of an Aesir tribe and lead them South towards Nemedia.

On the way, they meet a small band of Hyrkanians kidnapping the three children of Lord Garak. Nemedia is besieged by the Picts on the West and the Hyrkanians on the East. Garak is the only force standing between survival and slaughter. All the other noblemen are simpering cowards.

After bedding Shanara, the daughter of Garak, Ghor takes the three children back to Nemedia. There Garak hesitantly accepts Ghor in light of his daughter's love for the barbarian and hires the Aesir as mercenaries to fight the Picts. Lord Ushilon, who planned the earlier abduction in conspiracy with a Stygian sorcerer, kidnaps Ghor and Shanara. The Stygian transforms himself into a great bat-like creature and deposits naked Ghor in the North to die. Raised as a wolf, his hearty nature serves Ghor well as he begins the trip back to Nemedia.

On the way, he meets up with the ancestors of the Aesir and Vanir, the Yeh-ti or Mi-Go. For a time he feels at home and ignores the promptings of soul which urge him back into the conspiracies of Nemedian civilization.

Ultimately, Ghor finds he cannot be

happy with the Mi-Go and must again take up his search for Shanara. He returns to Garak only to find that his love has been shipped off to Turan for safe keeping under the advice of the now king Ushilon. After informing Garak of Ushilon's complicity, they march

to the king only to find him assassinated. Tashako wears the crown but only momentarily before Garak's forces take control and the young almost-king flees with Mentumener.

One of Garak's first orders is for Ghor to venture to Turan and return with Shanara. The emir Agha Junghaz refuses to release Shanara, he plans to wed her instead. Only through the help of Jahree, one of Agha Junghaz's jealous wives, is Ghor able to surprise the emir in his own stronghold and force him to swear by Set that Ghor, Shanara and their company may leave Turan unmolested.

Ghor is warned by Jahree at a parting banquet that the emir still plans treachery. Thus Ghor and company leave secretly in the night by stealing a merchant vessel and sailing East on the Vilayet Sea.

CHAPTER · NINE

The Mouth of the Earth

DARRELL SCHWEITZER

My Aesir and the Nemedians sang lusty battle songs as they rowed. I stood by the tiller with Skorla that first night, Shanara at my side, gazing ahead as we all did into the east. We had a good wind behind us, and we had already put many leagues between ourselves and the no doubt fuming Agha Junghaz before we witnessed our first dawn at sea. First there was a faint red glow on the water, or below it, and to me it was an omen presaging blood and slaughter, or else evidence of some vast battle fought by sea-gods beneath the waves. Then all the eastern horizon was alight, and the edge of the sun's golden shield appeared, and the waves sparkled orange and brilliant yellow and almost blinding white. The stars fled with the darkness, and the familiar constellations vanished, those of the Swordsman and the War-wain the last to go. It was a spectacular sight, and even I, Ghor the Strong, who had no particular sense of beauty and had grown up in a world of cold sunrises over glimmering glaciers, was moved by it. I had never seen to sea before and this was the beginning of my first day on its breast, out of sight of land, in a

strange new world. That dim, distant, and nearly forgotten thing known as James Allison was overawed by the sight, till he feared his ecstatic and weak heart would burst. He had never travelled at all in his current life, never known the basic and primal things of nature. He too had never before seen the sun, the world's first god, climb out of the belly of its mother the ocean, as fresh and newly-born as it had on the first day of creation.

Some of the others were also strangers to this environment. They stared about constantly as they toiled, gaping at watery wonders, at leaping porpoises and flying fish. Then, when Skorla called a rest, tied the tiller in place with a rope, and let the wind alone propel us, one of the Nemedians cried out, "I have such a thirst I could swallow all this!" And he waved his arm grandiosely, indicating the whole of the sea, and went to the side, leaned over, and put a handful of water to his lips.

An instant later he was sputtering and coughing.

"Horsepiss!" he spat. "It's poisoned! What magic is this?"

Skorla laughed, and the others joined in, even those who might have made the same mistake. The Nemedian put his hand to his sword-hilt, but the commander's laughter changed to a low growl, his look to an iron stare, and the man reconsidered. He went to the far front of the vessel to sulk.

"By the way," I whispered into Skorla's ear. "How much drinking water and food do we have on this thing?"

He looked shocked, as if some fell Stygian god had bewitched him.

"By the Gods!" he cried. "Am I the biggest fool to walk this earth since Arus the priest?"

"Peace friend. What is the matter? And lower your voice, lest your alarm cause discontent among the men."

"Brave Ghor, in our haste to seize this ship we forgot to provision her, or even check to see if she was provisioned. Of course we had little time, but so caught up were we in the boldness of our plan, and so grand a jest it seemed to behead the stupid Turanian thus, that we simply cut loose and sailed, without ever venturing below these decks."

He was genuinely ashamed. He had boasted of how fine a sea captain he had once been, and now his pride came crashing to ruin in this blunder.

"It was my plan and my order," I said. "You and the others carried it out well. There were far greater perils facing us in Turan than the prospect of an empty belly. When the wolf finds prey, he gorges himself, but when there is no meat, he is patient. Take after his example and be patient, Skorla."

"Aye! That is good advice, but will the others follow it? These city-bred women of Nemedians will turn against us if they don't get their dainties."

"Then we'll have to bash a few heads in. I am not afraid of that. Are you?"

"No, of course--"

"Then in the meantime let us go and see what we have."

The ship we had taken was sleek and shallow. It had no vast holds as Skorla said a lumbering merchantman would, just a cramped, stuffy wooden cave below the decks where cargo could be stored. It was all I could do as one used to the open of the wild to force myself to enter it.

Our inventory produced about four hundred glazed and brightly painted dishes, pots, and earthen lamps, no food at all, and one half empty, foul-smelling cask of water. Obviously, said Skorla, the vessel had just returned from a voyage the night we took her, and the owners had packed every available bit of space full of cargo, including only what stores the crew would need to survive their short trip. And it would have been a short trip too, for ships such

as this one were used for light and swift trading all along the Vilayet Sea. The object of such commerce was to bring a few valued items to a port quickly and sell them at high prices, before slower moving vessels could bring the same product in quantity and undercut. My friend knew all these things from his days as a pirate. He had never raided on this sea, but elsewhere things were much the same, and he knew this kind of vessel well. I had no interest in business, and looked on the pottery as useless baubles even more contemptible than gold, but I did appreciate the fact that our craft could outrun most others.

"And would it not be fleetest still," I asked, "if we were rid of this earthen garbage."

"It would."

So I ordered the men to throw it all into the sea. A couple of the Nemedians hesitated, saying that we should sell the stuff for gold, but when I gave them a choice of swimming back to Turan as merchants, dying quickly by my sword, or living to gain better loot as warriors, they obeyed me. Soon the ship's stomach was emptied, and the oars carried us even more swiftly from our foes than before, but in the act of crawling below to fetch out the cargo, all had learned the secret I could not hope to keep from them. We had no food and only a desperately low supply of filthy water. I rationed the water, as Skorla told me was done at sea, giving each man a ladle of it twice a day. There was some grumbling, and ultimately I did have to crack two or three Nemedian skulls, but there was no serious trouble. The Aesir respected and feared me, and they enforced my will merely by a glance, a touch to a sword, and simply by their towering stature and massive limbs.

Then after a day the same nature which had once charmed us turned, like a treacherous courtier, and began to dispense slow and subtle poison.

The wind died, and becalmed we sat day after day, until the very air seemed stagnant and filled with sweat. Skorla bade the men row until they could struggle no longer, and even he and I took our place at the oars, leaving the tiller held in place by rope. When the rest period came, each took his bitter ration of water, and there was no more singing, and very little talking. All toiled miserably, like slaves, in the sullen heat, until night brought some relief. But well before then my fair-skinned Aesir were all red as boiled lobsters and more foul-tempered toward the Nemedians than ever. None dared raise protest even in a glance or a gesture.

With the darkness, the conspiracy against us continued. A thin blanket of

cloud covered the sky, just enough to hide the stars, but promising no rain. I could read the stars as well as any mariner. The ice-fields of the North are much like the sea, vast, hostile, and deceptively quiet, but without being able to see the sky, neither Skorla nor I had any idea of where we were or where we were going, save that when morning came the sun was well to the left ("to port", as Skorla called it) and both of us had to strain at the tiller to set the ship right again. Still we headed east, where lay the far shore of the Vilayet Sea, but nothing else was known. How far north or south were we? How far west? Had we drifted in the night back the way we had come, into the lap of Agha Jung-haz?

Our situation became even more precarious as all grew weaker and the water cask approached empty. At ration time the ladies scraped the bottom through the skum, bringing up a putrid soup which some could not bear to drink. They talked of drinking piss, and licking the sweat from their bodies. Several were well nigh delirious.

Once a Nemedian spied a great fish following by our side, and he leapt overboard, a knife in his teeth. It was a brave deed, and we cheered him on, but a foolish one, for before any could even think to aid him, the fish had eaten him, and vanished in a cloud of blood. Skorla told me that the creature was named "shark" and in it the natures of the lion, the wolf, the bear, and the vulture were joined together. It was the most fearsome thing beneath the waves, save for the great whale, which, I gathered, was like a swimming mountain with a spewing fountain on its summit.

Far away there were sea birds flying, but they seemed to shun our ship. Skorla remarked that this was contrary to his experience. Usually such fowl freely rested on a ship's sail-tree, the thing he called "mast". Still, whenever one came a little closer than the others, someone would shoot at it. Eventually I had to command the men not to waste any more arrows.

All this while Shanara lay limply in a cabin which Skorla said had been built for the ship's captain. It was in the far rear. We stood on its roof when at the tiller, and it alone was big enough for a man to stand in, and it had windows for ventilation. My mate spent most of her time resting on a silken bed. The rolling of the decks had proven too much for her land-born stomach and feet.

I would join her each night as soon as the watery sunset had faded, but after a while we both were so exhausted from the heat, the hunger and our thirst that we had to foreswear even lovemaking. All I could do was curse blindly at the

gods, the fates, the magic, or the stupidity which had led me to die here, slowly shrivelling away like a piece of discarded carrion.

Late on the seventh night, the Aesir who stood watch by the tiller let out a hoarse croak and stamped his foot on the planking above my head. I awoke, and went outside to see what was the matter. I found the man standing on his tiptoes, peering ahead, and Skorla with him.

"Look," the Aesir said faintly, pointing.

The ship's bow was pointed into the rising sun, but that sun was not whole. Only the rim of its blinding disc was visible. The rest was a jagged blackness joined to the sea.

"Skorla, has the shark taken a bite of the sun while it is within his reach?"

My comrade only laughed in response and clapped me on the back and said, "No, north-born Ghor, no! It is an island and the sun is rising behind it." He began to shout. "Land! The gods have smiled on us after all! We're saved!"

Both of us were bellowing orders at once. Men scrambled to their benches and oars slapped the water, and the both of us shrieked with our thirst forgotten, "Row! Row till your backs break and your arms fly out of your shoulders! Row!"

They rowed, filled with hope, and singing as best they could with parched throats and cracked lips. The ship glided like a serpent over the waves. For the first time in what seemed like aeons a wind rose. The air grew cool and our sail filled, and aided us like a whole legion of fresh oarsmen. We moved so quickly that we seemed to fly from wavetop to wavetop. Then the sail was furled, and we beached the boat. As the sun rose the island grew from a black speck to a hump of thickly forested mountain rising above the waves. At the top stood bare, sheer stone cliffs. At the base was a wide, sandy shore onto which the sea drove us.

Just before we landed my lady Shanara emerged from her cabin for the first time in days. I marked once again how beautiful she seemed, her hair streaming in the wind, her face pale in the morning light. She came alive again after the long dead days in the cabin.

Unsteadily, she climbed up to where Skorla and I stood, and also looked upon the island.

"I wonder if anyone lives there," she said.

I touched the hilt of Genseric's sword.

"If anyone does, they'll give us what we want, or we'll take it with our valor." Secretly I hoped there would be fighting. After days of misery and inactivity, I

longed for slaughter, as I was sure the others did.

The waves did most of our work for us, driving the craft well up onto the island. Then all save Shanara leapt into the surf and dragged the vessel well onto the dry sand. After that, by unspoken consent we went at once in search of food and water. So we marched, Shanara by my side, the ship unguarded behind us.

It was good to be in the cool shade beneath the trees. They towered above us like colossal pillars, holding up the green roof of the forest. Hundreds of feet up vines criss-crossed, forming highways for armies of chattering monkeys.

We were refreshed almost at once. Heavy dew still hung on the leaves, and all of us licked it off, and arrows were spent, but this time not wasted. We feasted on monkey meat, and quaffed monkey blood. I had mine as soon as it was slain, raw, as did the Aesir, but the Nemedians built a fire and half-cooked theirs. My lady, true to her civilised upbringing, ate with them.

A while later, in the center of the island and half way up the side of the mountain, we came upon a cold stream, gurgling out of the rock. I was still suspicious of our sudden good fortune, as if someone were torturing us with hope the way a cat lets a wounded mouse run just long enough to make escape seem possible with the next swipe of its paw even more terrible.

I called a halt, commanding all to stand behind me, and the Aesir stood calmly and the Nemedians gawked, while I got down on all fours and sniffed the water. It seemed alright. I began to lap up my fill with my tongue. Then the others rushed all around me and drank deeply, pouring the cool water over them, dunking their heads in it, and rolling and splashing like squealing children.

We rested for a time, then explored the island more thoroughly. There were no inhabitants, but once there had been some. Hidden in the underbrush not far from the spring were huge stone blocks, crumbling to the touch, moss-covered and overgrown with vines, most of them nearly buried in the earth. On them were carvings like none I had seen before. Much had been erased by time and weather, but still many discernible figures remained, and few of them were human. There were a few manlike shapes, but these were small, and more often than not around the edges or in other unimportant positions. Monsters dominated the reliefs. Perhaps they were intended to be gods of some sort, huge squid-faced things with tentacles, claws and wings. They were colossi,

depicted as being taller than mountains, if the curved and jagged lines behind them were supposed to be mountains.

There was also writing of some sort on the blocks, which I asked Shanara to read, but she couldn't. The script was strange to her, but it was very ancient, she said, similar to things scholars puzzled over in her country, dating back to the times of ancient kingdoms with names which to me were only noises: Valusia, Atlantis, Lemuria, and others. Perhaps they meant more to James Allison, and perhaps he more than Ghor the Strong was impressed by the final and most spectacular discovery of the day.

We found a huge stone face all but buried in the jungle floor. It had cracked long ago under tremendous forces, perhaps the rising of this isle from the sea during the great cataclysm (so speculated Allison; Ghor knew nothing of such things). The visage was that of a bird, but it was wider and flatter. It had high cheekbones like a man, and close human eyes. But it also had once possessed a beak, which now had long since broken off and crumbled into dust. Still, the rough stump of it was almost as high as a man is tall, and three times that wide. Perhaps to Allison this meant or suggested something, but to me, Ghor, and the others present, it was just a curiosity.

Night was rapidly approaching. I ordered a camp to be made by the spring.

"Should we not go back to the beach and guard the ship?" one of the Aesir suggested.

"No," said I. "There is no one on this isle to attack us, and if an enemy should come from the sea, it is best that he not find us in the open on the beach. We'll spy him first and have the advantage. So we camp here."

I had sentries posted, four Nemedians a good hundred paces from the camp, one in each direction, and four Aesir much closer. Thus if anyone or anything approached, the outer sentries would raise the alarm and the inner sentries would echo it, and the camp would be awake and ready to meet the danger. Besides, I did not care to sleep with only Nemedians awake to guard me. Some of them might still bear me grudges for sore heads gained on the ship.

The sunset was long and deeply red, foretelling much blood, but that I assume was for the future, once we left this place. Shanara and I slept apart from the others that night on an outspread cloak, and for the first time in many days we had each other as wolf and mate. When sleep finally came I had no dreams.

The sentries were to be relieved every three hours. I came halfway to wakefulness once as the guards were changed and a few words were spoken. If this happened again, I slept through it. Thus, it was either in the second or third watch that I leapt to my feet to the sounds of shouting and tumult.

The moon was up and full. The bare cliffs above glowed, and the clearing by the spring where we were camped was brilliantly lit, and by moonlight I beheld something which filled me with amazement and rage. There was strife in the jungle. I could hear shouts and the clangor of steel, and others just awaking heard it also and ran to join in. But running towards me in abject terror were five Nemedians, fleeing the battle.

"Cowards! Dogs!" I screamed. "Will you desert Ghor and the Aesir? By all your gods you will not!"

They scattered when I raised Genseric's sword on high, and shrieked like women when I came at them in my blind rage. One tried to put a shield between himself and my anger, and I cut him a low blow beneath it, through his mailshirt and his belly and his spine, chopping his body entirely in two before his face could register anything but helpless surprise. He went down gurgling and spewing blood.

Who could run down the swiftest game had no trouble catching another of the cowards by the neck. I did not slay him at once, but yanked him to his knees, my left hand still on his throat. He stared up at me with wide eyes and whimpered, while I roared to him,

"Craven thing! What has so unmanned you?"

He stumbled, and found words. "Lord--run! Run for your life and your sanity. Blackest sorcery--none can stand against--!"

I tightened my grip, all but breaking his neck.

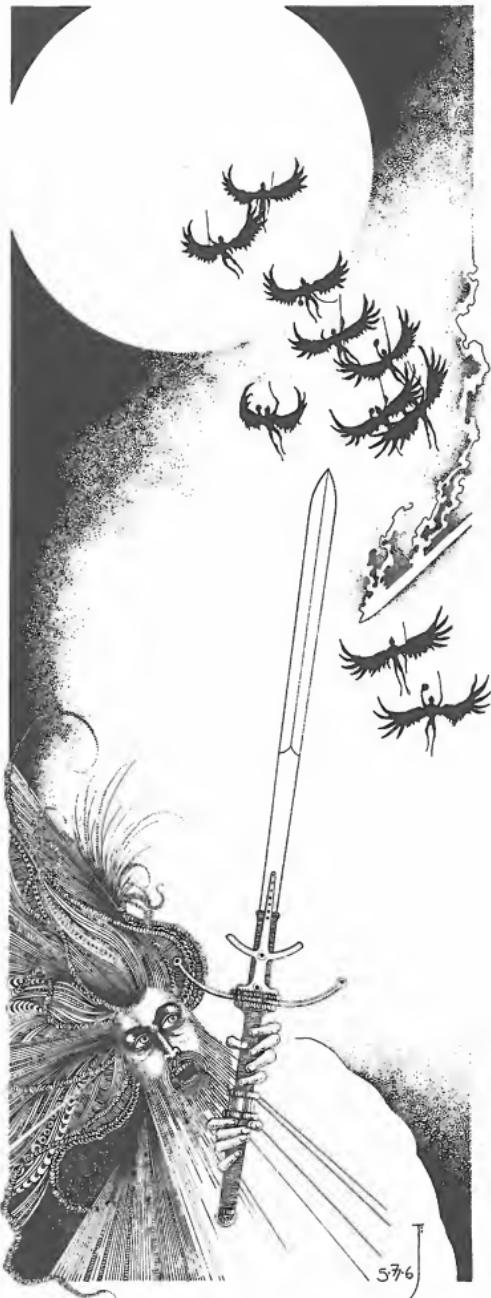
"What foe? Speak, snivelling cur!"

"Lord, hear me and believe," he pleaded. "Legions of bronze warriors attacked the watch, men with beaked masks and plumes on their helmets, and metal wings on their backs so they seemed like furious birds as they swooped down on us out of the treetops, tearing guts with claws and swords, shooting fire with their spears!"

"And you leave the rest to fight while you escape? If you cannot live like a man, you cannot die like one." And in the strength of my fury I crushed his neck entirely with my one hand, then yanked till his head came free. I threw it at one of the fleeing figures and felled him. In all this, only seconds had passed. I would not be held from the fight myself. Whirling Genseric's huge blade over my head, and with shield raised on high, I charged into the jungle, screaming the warcry of the northern berserker.

But the battle reached me before I came to it. The Nemedian had spoken truly, and hundreds, nay, thousands of winged men were descending from the starry sky, flapping stiffly through the branches with flaming spears and silver swords in their hands, and shields of beaten gold. Were they men at all, covered from head to foot with armor, or mechanical things? I could not know as I fought them, and my mad blood-fury abolished all thoughts. I fought with speed, with strength and with agility a man of James Allison's time could never have comprehended, and I smashed metal bodies, hewing off heads and limbs. But they did not die. Some of them lay still, while others grotesquely crawled and hopped after I had maimed them. And they shed no blood, as living things would. Still I fought on, hopelessly, eternally, while more and more of them came, crowding upon one another, blotting the moon from the sky. Their wings, their masks, their shields were everywhere, a sea of metal. Around me others still fought. Sometimes between the waves of bronze and the sheets of fire I saw an Aesir, or aye, even a brave Nemedian, battling desperately, and sometimes I saw them go down. Once Skorla was beside me for an instant. Then he was gone. Then a headless, limbless trunk dropped out of the sky in front of me, sending a foe tumbling with its weight. Even in death my brave friend fought for me.

The very earth came into the fray against us. The mountain





trembled and roared, sending avalanches of boulders and earth down over man and harpy alike. The trees cast down their limbs, then fell, and huge vines cut the sky like whips wielded by titans.

It was more than my senses could bear. Suddenly I seemed to be alone, tumbling upward in a black cloud, then in a wave of stone and men and earth, and all I could see was the mountain peak, supreme and haughty beneath the moon. *And the face of the mountain opened up*, revealing two gigantic, red-flaming eyes, and opened again an endless cavern of a mouth, out of which came a tongue, swift as a toad's, but as powerful as a waterfall. It seized me and bore me up, and the earth was rent apart to swallow me, and all from then on was sheerest madness. First I was falling in darkness and in thunder. Still Genseric's sword was in my hand, and still I swung wildly with it, but connected with nothing. I could not even conceive of the forces at work around me. I was an ant in a raging torrent, a mere speck on a vast sea of blood and broken stone...Somewhere I glimpsed a huge bat-thing, and whatever primitive terror I might have had of the unknown vanished with the recognition. *Mentumenen!* He was part of his! But who else? *What else?* Even the greatest of the Stygian sorcerers could not command such forces. Even he could not make the earth move, make the mountain open its mouth. He had allies. This was the doing of gods, and things greater than gods.

Falling through utter darkness...

I came to...

Rest on a featureless ebon plain.

Before me stood a great mass of folk, and in the forefront of them were my four brothers, Raki the Swift, Sigismund the Bear, Obri the Cunning, and Alvin the Silent, plus my father Genseric, Gudrun of the Shining Locks, my mother, plus all the others I had slain, all of them with looks of venomous hatred on their faces. With them also were Agha Jungahz, the black Mentumenen, and the brat Tashako. They spoke as if with one voice:

"Hail, unnatural thing! Hail Ghor kinslayer! All nature, all the earth and all the things beyond the earth revile thee. The most basic of all commandments hast thou violated. Does the whelp turn upon the wolf-bitch? *No!* But Ghor turned. Think not to escape thy doom, thou abomination lower than the beast! Behold! All things cry for vengeance. *Behold thy nemesis!* We are all joined together to oppose thee!"

I cannot say entirely what followed after this. There was a flash of light, then an explosion of thunder so great my whole body seemed crushed to pieces, and then, when the bedazzlement had left my eyes, I saw before me, not a crowd of foes, but a single enemy, a bronze giant vast enough that he could have held the world between his outstretched legs. His face was a featureless mask, half shrouded in dark smoke. Around his ears lightning flickered.

His sword descended slowly, inevitably, unstoppably, like the onrush of time, ready to split the earth.

And in a red dream more vivid, more fury-filled than life, I raised my own sword, not Genseric's any longer, but my sword, and shouted, *"Ghor defies all things! Ghor exacts his own just vengeance. I will not deny what I have done. I shall fight all mankind, all gods, all demons. I shall flatten the earth with my sword. I shall crush down the planets. I shall uncreate all, raze all to slag and LAUGHING leap as it falls into the primal screaming chaos whence it came! Again I slay Genseric and his folk! Again, and again, and again!"*

Then the giant and I contended. Either he shrank to the stature of a man, or I grew to be a giant. I cannot say, but I think it was the latter. Nothing was clear to me, as I raged with a blood-lust even the most crazed berserker never dreamed possible. I seem to recall the earth shaken, mountains tumbled as we fought. When our blades met white sparks flew, and the heavens roared. I fought on and on, awash in faces and blood and foes the blank mask suspended before me. It was as if my whole body were crushed and crushed and crushed, beyond pain, beyond death,

into a new state entirely where the senses could not follow. The only reality was hatred, the only color that of blood, the only sounds screams, grunts, and the smashing of metal upon metal.

Gradually the combat slackened. I was not aware of seeing, or of feeling anything by that point, save a slow abatement of my own fury. The tide of gore receded from me. The giant was gone. I still held the sword of Genserict. And pain returned.

I found myself staggering in a daze, beneath the bright morning sun, on the beach near where our ship had landed. All around me lay the mutilated corpses of my comrades, hacked to pieces by foes of unnatural fury. The trunk of Skorla was as it had fallen, and the headless man, and the Nemedian cut in half were as I remembered.

What—how had this happened? Had those all been carried down the mountain and out of the jungle? I looked up at the bare-faced summit, and it was still, eyeless as it had always been. Birds and monkeys screeched in the trees.

I saw to my added horror and incomprehension that there were no foemen lying there, only my fellows, the Aesir and the Nemedians. And my sword alone was completely red. I could not comprehend—

I was weak, in the greatest agony I had ever known. The pain localised, to one side, then one limb. My whole body was covered with wounds, my right thigh slashed deeply, the knee laid bare to the bone, but it was on my left where the greatest hurt was. I stared dumbly and saw that my arm had been hewed off just below the elbow.

Like an automaton I knelt in the bloody sand, took a belt from a dead man, and bound the wound. My mind was not functioning at all, but my survival instincts made me do this. With the effort and the added pain, I fainted, but even then I found no peace, for a thought came which forced me back into consciousness. I stumbled to my feet and ran from one end of the beach to the other, looking among the lifeless bodies, kicking them here and there. The one I sought was not among them.

"Shanara! Shanara!"

Just before I fainted again, I chanced to look to the unknown east and see, far out over the water, scarcely more than specks, two wide-winged things I knew were not birds, carrying between them a limp burden.

CHAPTER · TEN

The Gods Defied

A.E. · VAN · VOGT

The gods had struck so murderously that, after all these years of accepting the world as it was, I was shaken. My left arm severed at the elbow, I stood on the sandy shore beside a restless sea, all the while suppressing groans of pain. Stood there with my feet sunk in the wet sand, and strove with my eagle vision to pierce the misty distances where I had last seen two flying beings carrying my beautiful lost Shanara to an unknown fate. In vain I gazed.

Yet already I could feel an inward bracing for what must surely be: the pursuit. So, tensing my muscles, grinding my teeth, I spun around. And walked again through the fallen, slaughtered dead. A stiff breeze was blowing. It stirred the trees through which I, Ghor, who had once been the Strong, moved with an outward appearance of determination.

Yet, as I trod that bloodied ground, at a deep of my being there was a strange, terrible thought...that the gods had finally rendered a long-considered basic decision.

Against me.

Nay, more; worse. The decision was against what I was. What I stood for. An awesome feeling I had, that the world of life was unfinished. And that they had been watching all these years which way the turn should go.

As the meaning and the threat of that realization grew more into my consciousness the wolf that I was in spirit, the beast in me, drew back slit lips. I walked, then, grimly, showing hard, white teeth. And several times I spat at the emptiness and desertyness around me. It was defiance, yay.

What galled the savagery inside me was a conviction that the choice had been made too quickly. I was accidentally a product of the Great Wild. Though possessed of a human brain, I belonged to the multi-millennia parade of Nature, unsullied. We beasts represented a great purity. We were in pulsing unity

with the beat of the vast universe around us.

The direction of that untamed life reflected the changing climate of the immense earth on which we all dwelt. And yet, now, abruptly, from above, a fateful decision had been made to change that direction by force.

Much too soon. I could even guess, now, that the gods had deliberately introduced civilization. Perhaps, it was their child. And that what was to me a pallid alternative to the forests, the animals, and the primeval sea was to them an object of pride and self-congratulation. Perhaps, an exact facet of civilization appealed to them especially. What could it be? If I could decide that, then I would make my attack exactly at the point of their peak admiration.

With that grim thought, I ceased my tense striding. Came to a full stop. Raised my head, and glared upward. Standing there, I lifted the shining sword of Genserict until it pointed at the gray heavens above. And I roared: "Ythillin, come!" I screamed. "Mad hating woman of the Ice Gods, I would have words with thee! Ythillin!"

Can a human being dare to demand attention of the gods? He could—he can—if there is a great decision being rendered by those self-same gods. And if he—accidentally—is the only aware entity of the innumerable victims of that decision. So strong was my conviction of being the spokesman for the wilderness, I actually felt that the transformation could not really happen unless I agreed to it, or was overwhelmed.

"Ythillin!" I bellowed, "you cunning creature, using me to help create a civilization whereby the gods could then be fortified in destroying my kind. Despicable schemer, reveal yourself!"

I had other dark words quivering at the tip of my tongue. But they remained unuttered as a mist took form in front of me.

Sword clutched warily, I poised,

waiting. Not sure of what I would do with the witch woman when she materialized.

I admit there was a taste of steely triumph as I savored the fact that my angry demand was being answered.

The feeling of a partial victory achieved...faded abruptly. The form had solidified, and it was not Ythillin.

With a response of horror, I recognized the creature-being in the mist: Mentumenen!

So this was the answer of the gods. Not Ythillin, she of the ice gods, but the demon magician who played the game of even more powerful beings.

Those sly eyes smiled with enigmatic, satanic intent into mine. The voice, strangely harsh, as if accustomed to a more rasping language, said in my Aesir dialect:

"You have no doubt wondered why in our past association you were merely rendered unconscious and not slaughtered. It was the will of the gods of the south that they observe your wildness yet a little longer. In their fairness they granted the possibility that perhaps there was an additional lesson for them to learn about your kind, and your life direction. That lesson, they believe, they have now learned. And the overwhelming decision is against what you stand for. So--"

The voice sound of the magician continued to violate the otherwise silent air of the uninhabited island where I had already lost so much. But as the meaning came to that deadly stage, I ceased to hear the words he uttered. My mind had not during any of those minutes entirely ceased considering ways of escape from the super-being. But now, suddenly, escape or attack--or what--was all that my attention could encompass.

In fleeting moments of memory, I recalled my past experiences with Mentumenen. I found no encouragement in anything I recalled. In fact what I remembered established beyond all question that he was at least of demon level, perhaps even half a god. And what I had seen of him proved that his powers transcended all human limitations. Limitations which, even when I was in full possession of my physical strength, I had always accepted and adjusted to.

Edging carefully off to one side toward firmer ground, I summoned up one basic defensive thought: Demon Mentumenen, beware a wounded wolf!

I may have been dangerous before. But as an undamaged being, at some deep inside me there was always a survival instinct. There was a constant hot calculation of chances, and even a willingness to retreat in the face of obvious danger.

A wounded wolf has a different hot mixture in his feverish brain. Suddenly, the impossible has happened. The earlier, timeless sense of invulnerability was forcibly penetrated. Negated all too visibly--for there dangles what is left of bleeding flesh. And every torn nerve end screams a fearful message of desperation.

Yes, beware a wounded wolf!

As James Allison, of course, I know that isn't as true as it sounds. Having--as Allison--read history in my search for what followed the time of Ghor, I realize that men of equally grim determination as anything ancient humans ever experienced, used mutilation as a method of controlling dangerous individuals.

After Caesar's victory over the forces of Vercingetorex, every captured male of the opposing army had his right hand cut off, and the wrist immediately bound by tight thongs--even as I had, myself, tied my severed arm. My purpose, now, and the Roman purpose was to ensure that the mutilation did not cause death by bleeding. It was Roman justice, Roman mercy, an extremely high level of civilization, which did not kill the defeated, did not even in such instances enslave; simply rendered incapable of ever again waging warfare against Rome.

So, even as I snarled my intent at vengeance and opposition to the gods as only Ghor could, that deep inner part of me cringed as Vercingetorex must have, also.

It was the other way for me to go. The way of withdrawal. The way of accepting limitations. How many limbs do you have to remove from a wild beast before it will finally lie down and die? Or--as in the case of a man--before he will admit to himself: I am now, at last, no better than the farmer who was tilling the soil two journeys ago, back there. And we left him unharmed because we recognized that somebody must do that kind of labor. Somebody--not us, not men of spirit--but somebody.

As I stood there--even as I raged there--I could feel all these possibilities already moving through that part of my brain that calculates the truth of things from moment to moment. And there was a feeling of, perhaps, now, finally, I should do what, in her womanly way, Shanara had already intimated--not in direct words--but by a few well-shed tears, and by other signals that were not lost on me, but which I dismissed as being beneath the notice of Ghor, the warrior.

All this emotion and diminished thinking could have led to some large self-restriction--had I been given time to let the darkness inside me continue its silent, deadly argument. But, as often

happens, a warrior is not allowed time to think. In this case, my enemy saw that I was sorely wounded and handicapped. And so he moved rapidly in for the kill.

Beware attacking a wounded wolf! He has nothing to lose. He will fight to the death. And he is extra dangerous. Because now he does not really care whether, indeed, he lives or dies.

And, possibly, being wounded, he is forced to be cunning rather than aggressive.

A direct attack on a god or a demon is, of course, as impossible as an assault by a pack of wolves against a water buffalo. I had watched headstrong young wolves learn this bitter lesson the hard way, with the death of half their companions, and everyone that was still alive limping off wounded or maimed.

A wise pack worries a dangerous prey. A few make false lunges toward the head. Whereupon, the distracted victim-to-be turns to face an array of sharp, strong teeth. And as he does so, other attackers rush in against his rear legs. One, two, three quick, slashing nips--and then away. It takes time, this method, and many fierce bites. But presently the massive creature's hind legs can no longer support him...Brave, powerful buffalo, your hour for being a tasty meal for a hungry pack has arrived--

My first sword stroke was aimed cunningly at Mentumenen's robe. As he did a twisting thrust with his stave, seeking to jab with it at a control point in my body--I had heard of these demon devices, and twisted away--his cloak flailed through the air. I neatly ripped one end with razor sharp Genserick.

Demons are evidently not any smarter than humans; for he laughed in glee, and taunted: "Missed! But then, you will discover that you will always miss."

It was a battle, there on the sandy island, with my one cunning strategy against his ever more irritable attacks. Each time, he stabbed angrily at me with his rod, my task was to evade the thrust by a hair's breadth, so that he would be encouraged to believe that victory was near, and each time my great sword cut one more shred from his flowing magician's robe.

The protective robe became a battered thing. And there came an unwary moment when he stepped back into one of the tatters--and stumbled.

In that instant of marvellous opportunity, what other fighters would have attempted, I cannot predict. My sword flicked down deliberately and cut at the tassel at the rear of the slipper he wore on his right foot. It was as small an advantage as anyone could possibly take of an enemy being momentarily at his

mercy.

By the time that apparently futile thrust was made, Mentummen had freed his other foot from its entanglement. Visibly exultant at his escape, he probed again, almost contemptuous.

Twelve thrusts later he was treading with bare feet the rough ground in the brush towards which I had led him as I retreated. Both his slippers were gone. A portion of his left pantaloons was sliced open. One sleeve of his black goat's wool coat was ripped from wrist to elbow. And a tiny streak of blood trickled from the little finger of his left hand—the result of my first intentional cut at living flesh.

He did not seem concerned. The lean, dark countenance was serious, yes, but the eyes were narrowed, and unworried. Was he stupid? I believe that his inner situation was much worse for him than that. He was an agent of the gods, with special personal powers. So he literally could not conceive of any mortal being dangerous to him. After all, he need but touch certain key spots in my body with his rod--two at minimum, three at most--and I would instantly be stricken.

Yet even for a naive Great Power there is finally a moment of realization. For Mentummen that moment did not dawn until he was stark naked except for a dangling piece of coat that spanned across his left shoulder and hung by a thread over his right hip.

At that instant—a thought. A startled blink. At that instant he turned and ran. It was so sudden that I, who had been

wary, was—I admit it—caught by surprise. Naturally, almost at once I raced after; but even while doing so I recollected who this was. So I loped; I did not charge recklessly.

And so, as I rounded an outcrop of rock there above me, his naked body awkwardly straddling his rod, was my vicious enemy. Seeing him do that magical escape by air, where I could not follow, I shouted after him: "And tell your masters that I and my wild beasts defy them all, and will defeat their false decision, and never, never agree to it."

He was higher, floating up on a strong wind, as I heard his voice come back at me. The words that came down from that wind-blown height were: "Remember your Ice Gods' warning. Success up to a certain time you could have. And then a turning point. Evidently, this island is not your place of doom, but soon—soon!—you will taste the bitter disaster of a male who has lost his woman, not to death, but to another. A woman who has finally grown old enough to realize that a great stinking brute used and abused her by force."

The island was, indeed, not my time of doom. That very day, late in the afternoon, hope arived as I was inspecting the emptiness of the vessel that had brought my ill-fated army to its night of total slaughter—inspecting it with the thought that, perhaps, I would, myself, set it on course. My hope was that fair winds would drive the vessel eastward. It was there, in that direction, I had last seen Shanara being transported by two of the flying metal men whom the gods

had sent to destroy me. And to there, of course, I must go with all haste.

In spite of Mentummen's shattering prediction about her future negative attitude toward me, now, still, she needed me. My hope had to be that I could rescue her before she suffered some desperately ill fate.

As for that vile prediction, itself, I spat on it. Literally spat over the railing into the water. It was an expression of my contempt and my dismissal of the foul creature's claim that Shanara would reject me and my love for her. It was well known, I told myself grimly, that demons were silly creatures, given to cheating and lying for their masters in the sky.

I say, I was considering such a lone voyage when a distant sail appeared. Soon, a large craft lay to, off shore. And, presently, I was being rowed to it. By morning I had made an agreement with its master, whereby a skeleton crew from his vessel would ferry me to the unknown east lands. In exchange for this desperately needed opportunity to follow Shanara, I presented him with the ship.

Intending never again to possess any mark or stigma of advanced civilization.

(To be continued in FANTASY CROSSROADS 15 with chapters by Brian Lumley and Frank Belknap Long.)

ROUND-ROBIN NOVEL CONTRIBUTORS NOTES

In the rush and exuberance of finally getting another issue into print, I inadvertently forgot to give some biographical data on the two authors who contributed round robin novel chapters in FC #13. I'll now try to rectify that situation plus acquaint you with the contributors this issue.

In reality, few readers probably need to be introduced to Andrew J. Offutt or Manly Wade Wellman. I cannot tell you how many volumes of fiction Offutt has written, but I can name a few favorites like **THE SWORD OF THE GAEL** and **THE UNDYING WIZARD** (which are only a couple of the novels he wrote continuing the saga of REH's Cormac Mac Art). I'd also mention **CHIEFTAIN OF ANDOR** (and I'm still awaiting the sequel on that one). Andrew is also known in another "genre" as John Cleve and I've yet to sample his work in that erotic genre.

Perhaps most noteworthy is his series of three anthologies featuring the

most unique and innovative heroic fantasy written for the market today. I'm speaking of **SWORDS AGAINST DARKNESS** (SAD) volumes I thru III. In three volumes, thirty-one stories, one poem, one article, three introductions and numerous story notes, Andrew has established a friendly, personable, trend setting tradition which Lin Carter (in his series) has not matched and which Gerald Page in this new anthology must attempt to equal. I'm excited about this series and if you haven't sampled it (especially volume III) get off your duff and do so.

Manly Wade Wellman has been a contributor to all three volume of SAD. He was a frequent contributor to **WEIRD TALES**. Many people can say that, but with Manly we mean it. He contributed over 50 stories to that deceased but highly revered pulp. Arkham House published a collection of his work titled **WHO FEARS THE DEVIL**, and more recently Carcosa issued **WORSE THINGS WAITING** (\$9.50 from Box 1064, Chapel Hill, NC 27514) featuring 28 stories and two poems selected from hundreds which have seen print. We're

mighty proud to have this former cowboy, former newspaperman, former bouncer and current popular author involved in this round-robin project.

Darrell Schweitzer kicks off the round-robin this issue with a very bizarre chapter. He's also a contributor to SAD III with "The Hag". Darrell is no newcomer to Stygian Isle Press publications. His fiction appeared in **FANTASY CROSSWINDS** (FCW) #1 ("The Story Of The Brown Man"), FCW #2 ("The Veiled Pool of Mistorak"), FCW #3 ("The Last Horror Out Of Arkham") and FC 10/11 ("A Vision of Rembathene").

Darrell's credits are far from limited to FC and SAD though; his work has appeared in **GALAXY**, **FANTASTIC**, **VOID**, and **WEIRDOOK**. He's also edited **DREAM QUEST OF HPL** by Borgo Press. Darrell has the potential to be a very popular and prolific author...if he doesn't offend the gods. I fear for him, especially after he suggested in a recent letter that Set may really be one of the Old Ones in drag. I haven't heard from you lately, Darrell, are you patching (continued on page 38.)

Kenneth Smith an appreciation



In a field sometimes noted for working certain themes to the point of their becoming clichés, Kenneth Smith stands with a small select group of original talents. The man's vision, craftsmanship and devotion to quality have all placed him in the front ranks.

He was born on 8 December 1943 in Austin, Texas and spent the next twenty-three years in the area until his graduation from the University of Texas. In the mid '50's he discovered E.C. comics, which had a profound influence on him as an artist and writer, though the influence was to remain dormant (for the most part) for slightly over a decade. From the late '50's and through his college years Kenneth produced art for a range of subjects—political cartoons, illustrations, decorative calligraphy, etc. Although college did not leave him with an abundance of time to devote to art (he majored in philosophy), he managed to fill many sketchbooks with precise, detailed anatomical studies and even had a short story published in the July 1963 *FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION*.

After graduation in 1966, Kenneth married his wife Angela and came north to New Haven, Connecticut to pursue graduate studies at Yale University. About this time, quality comic art fanzines were first appearing: *SPA FON*, *SQUATRON* and the legendary *WITZEND*. Published appearances in all three led to widespread recognition within the field and soon it was all Kenneth could do to stay abreast of the enthusiastic demand for his work. Not one to confine his abilities, he soon appeared professionally on several covers for the Warren publications, as well as paperback covers for *Lancer* and *Ace*. During this period of graduate studies and an ever-growing appreciative audience, in early 1970, the Smith's first child, Devon, was born.

Problems existed despite what appeared to be an idyllic existence and rapidly-growing career as a fantasy artist. Kenneth made two decisions that were to remove him from the market (though not the ranks) of the profession-

als. The first was to publish his own work; by doing so, hassles with art directors and publishers, irresponsible fan editors who don't return originals, the varying reliability of the mails, the widely divergent quality of reproduction between different publications (even professionally)—all of these problems could be eliminated.

In a privately circulated biography Kenneth states: "Self-publication allowed me, really, countless benefits: instead of seeing my work appear in fragmented portfolios, with varying calibres of reproduction, I could exert myself to make both the content and printing a complete work of art, a challenge that I inevitably had to take up..."

The second decision was to teach philosophy at Louisiana State University, more than a full-time occupation itself. (He was awarded his Ph.D. from Yale in 1972.)

Since then the Smith family has grown and Smith artwork has burgeoned into exquisite refinement in an amazing variety of media, and the publication of his own work has led to a pinnacle of the printing art, reproducing images with a clarity and richness even



the printers themselves thought impossible.

The first issue of Kenneth Smith's *PHANTASMAGORIA* appeared in mid-1971, a fable from the Age of Reptiles, the first in a series, amidst the

highest praise. Never before had a one-man effort been so lavish and of consistently high quality. Inside the duotone wraparound cover was thirty-eight pages filled to the brim with breathtaking art, calligraphy (not a single typewritten word), story, wit, and philosophy; a rich package of the ultimate in integration between text and art meant to be savored many times over, not merely read once and filed away. Every aspect of the publication was done with the highest possible fidelity to the limits of the craft.

Two quotes from that first issue help to give an idea of *PHANTASMAGORIA*'s direction. Here was a publication that did far more than offer a few moments of escape and entertainment; it was what fantasy should be about.

"...being human, we do not understand what is closest to us. We need to have our reality distorted, varied, played with, to appreciate what is truly of value in it. ... Fantasy does the necessary violence to the cruel imaginings that are daily taken for reality. The truth in fantasy is that reality lies about the most important matters: in fantasy we find humans too beautiful to be real, but these beings are only able to SHOW better than we the mystery and freedom that are in every human being."

"...very simple concepts are said to lie behind the turbulence in our present age... In other days, embodied in other creatures, these concepts mean more to us somehow. ... these creatures' ecology, their sense of place in the world, doesn't appear to them as natural accident—it makes moral sense because it preserves what they find valuable and controls what they consider dangerous. Evolution, so regarded, becomes a Morality Play ... which itself doesn't have any obvious point or moral; but we may see in it not a cheap lesson about arbitrary relativism, but the deep sense in life's permutations. We gain ... a respect for the richness life imparts to existence."

Kenneth proved self-publication could attain the highest standards and then some, but with a price. Self-publication also means a lot of self-promotion, time-consuming work. And when you teach full-time and are devoted to your family, the time spent on art be-
(continued on page 38.)





Kenneth Smith
18 NOVEMBER 1971



Kenneth Smith
26 November



GIZZLESTINES & GOBLIN ROSES PREVISITED

HANNES BOK IN VERSE & LETTERS



Hannes Bok was born in 1914 in a small town in Minnesota. He is still remembered as one of the most brilliant artists in the history of fantasy illustration. In addition to his artistic accomplishments, Bok also was a weaver of fiction tales and a versifier. Through the efforts of Emil Petaja, some of Hannes' verse has been preserved in the SISU (PO Box 14126, San Francisco, CA 94114) volume SPINNER OF SILVER AND THISTLE. Much of Bok's verse would have escaped notice and wandered into oblivion if it had not been for Edith Ogutsch, friend and correspondent to the late author/artist. After the appearance of Stygian Isle Press' OMNIUMGATHUM, Steve Troyanovich and Edith began contemplating a volume of unpublished Bok letters and verse. Donald Sidney-Fryer wrote a perfect introduction to the volume. Edith contributed a tribute piece. Steve Troyanovich gathered, read and selected the best verse available from the papers of Hannes Bok. I began having various artists (Stephen Fabian, Steve Riley, Gene Day, Richard Huber Jr., Jeff Easley and others) create illustrations and decorations for the volume. We hoped to have it published by SIP in hardcover, possibly in connection with another book publisher.

The volume is fairly close to completion but I became the stick in the mud. As editor of FC, I began to garner a more realistic view of what I could handle both in time and in finances within the range of this "hobby." So the volume languishes on the drawing board. So we (Edith, Steve and I) proceeded with our second option. We'll serialize portions of the book (oh yes, Steve and Edith titled it GIZZLESTINES AND GOBLIN ROSES) in FC.



We begin this issue with a smattering of verse, but the highlight is a letter which reads more like a prose poem. I can't tell you how many times I've re-read this epistle and gained new insight into beauty and "happiness".

I never met Hannes Bok, but I know him. He was a striving, struggling man. He never knew the financial success of a Frank Frazetta or Jeff Jones. His strug-

gle was not all financial either, in part it was a struggle of the soul. I've heard it suggested that if Bok sold a portion of the paintings he hoarded in his apartment, he would have known moderate affluence...but they were his children. Bok was a lonely man, a thinker, a dreamer, a weaver of "silver and thistle". And just as he often knew the prick of the thistle, so too he often saw the silver spinning joyously on the loom of creation. His letter to Roger Robinson is a piece of the silver.

—Jonathan Bacon



With Whizzens...

A LETTER FROM HANNES BOK

DECORATIONS BY

STEPHEN RILEY

BASED ON SKETCHES BY BOK

EDITOR'S NOTE (Steve Troyanovich): As part of our special tribute issue, we are pleased and fortunate to be able to present the following Hannes Bok letter to his close friend, Roger Robinson. In addition to being one of Bok's closest friends, Mr. Robinson was also both a supporter and firm believer in the genius of Hannes Bok. A sincere interest in astrology was another strong bond which fascinated them both.

Upon reading this letter, we trust that you will agree it is one of the most hauntingly beautiful, and purest expressions of feeling in the language, and as he himself might have deemed it, the letter is **PURE BOK**.

Lear Rog: The Olivetti busted the other day (a small screw hurtled out of its workings and carriage-shift refused to function thereafter) so I've drug-out the Old but Beloved Royal (had bit of work adjusting to its different keyboard) to use till manage to get Olivetti fixed.

Thanky for all the party stamps, one of which is being returned to you on envelope. We're having a cold & white Xmas: snowed 7 to 8 inches nite before last. Gosh, all of a sudden I got 4 invites for Xmas (one I wouldn't dream of accepting: odious people who occasionally descend on me & drive me nuts: last time they were here I had nightmares afterward) & it's amusing: 364 days a year I live on bread, beans, boiled spuds, etc., then on the 365th day I could have turkey & pie 4 times in a row. So I played it foxy this year, & suggested a rain check with those I couldn't accept--so mebby instead of usual dull fare in mid-January it gives a hot meal instead!!!!

The colorful glass floats can be bought here at Jap stores, but that takes all the fun out of them. They're no fun at all unless you or a friend has FOUND them while beach-combing, on the same principle that a perfect cake bought at a bakery doesn't taste as good as a cake baked by a friend.

I think Laguna Beach is a short bus trip SOUTH of Los Angeles. It was lovely & rural in times I saw it, probably overpopulated & commercial now. Still, perhaps a short bus trip a few miles farther south might disclose some new and as yet not-widely-settled place just like the Old Laguna Beach.



aybe it's because--feeling sick--you lack enthusiasm & spirit of discovery. I lose some enthusiasm when I'm sick, too. But all thru your letter I note something I hadn't thought of before--that perhaps you look for happiness outside yourself, as being something like a flower you find in a field and pick. Or maybe I'm reading into your letter something that isn't there, because of late I've had a number of people who tend to think of happiness as something apart from themselves and to be ingested like a malted milk, or a box of donuts. It worries me, but I don't know how to put-across to them that each of us is a little duplicate of the Solar System (because of the planets in our horoscopes) and that "as above, so below"--what's outside of us is also within us.

They seem, most of them, to have swallowed a lot of false values, and haven't had time or desire to take time off to think about it and set themselves straight about it. To such folk I usually recommend that they see the film (often on TV) or read the book of **OUR TOWN** by Thornton Wilder.

When I see a little path running through a wood, to me it's a Road to Enchantment. I know very well that it's "only a path" and that nothing thrilling awaits me along it. But also, I've the capacity (thanks to God!) to turn a little switch in my head, and to see that path (and venture along it, exploring it) as Enchanted indeed--if I keep my mind and senses open to the little surprises along it--the "charm of the unexpected"--and so I wander along it, not setting any standard of enjoyment, or telling it what it's

got to give me before I'll agree to enjoy it, but letting it give me whatever it's got, and accepting it without reservation--and so I find a bunch of interesting ants engaged in a titanic engineering project, comparable to the building of a Great Pyramid; a ray of sunlight shafting through the dusky leaves and gilding just one little twig and a few leaves into beauty I'll never forget, like a spotlight pointing and saying, "Look, here's something special" and I stop to marvel at the veins of the leaves, and realise I couldn't duplicate them in a skillion years if I started out on my own, with nothing to copy. Or I find a feather in the grass, and wonder what bird it came from, and why, and for an instant I'm off soaring. Or perhaps I'll even be lucky enough to sense slight motion in tall grass, like a faint breeze, and out of the grass a jewel-eyed cat will slink, and pause to make friends for a moment, then go its way. Such things are to me the most lovely things in all of life, and always there waiting.

But most wrong-valued people are seldom happy because they found their happiness in others, calling it "love" or "friendship" or any other nice-sounding name, though really it means they're simply afraid to be by themselves because they're blind (like newly born kittens) to the jillion things around them--all they know is a sort of "lost" self-ness, and so they turn to other people trying to find themselves, as one might look into a mirror--they can't dare to be alone because loneliness to them is emptiness.

That's why the desert seems so beautiful to me, because it's utter loneliness. I love loneliness, but I don't like loneliness (there's a vast difference) and I love remote strips of beach (away from everybody else) for the same reason.

I've never had all the time I wanted, to walk miles & miles along a lonely beach, and to enjoy all its treasures, but I sure dream of doing it one day. The mere feel of sand-hot in the sun and trickling through my fingers as though I'm an hour-glass, controlling Time; or cold and wet, and good for moulding into little statues that dry and fall apart.

The rhythms of the waves, and the always similar, never identical patterns of the foam. The sound of the wind in my ears. The feel of the water. Broken bits of shell like letters of strange alphabets that seem almost about to spell out some wonderful word I can almost fathom; little scuttling things (soft shell crabs? I dunno) that are gone before I quite see them.

Or just sitting on a lawn, very prosaic--but if I hold my eyes to one spot, suddenly I notice (peripherally) movement everywhere--it's teeming with countless little lives all unaware of me. That's why I want to live to be at least a million in this one form alone, because even then I couldn't exhaust the senses I now have. I want to peep through telescopes and microscopes, I want to see the difference in fires of maple, or of mesquite, or of oak; I want to compare the textures and tints of roses and orchids and lotuses; I want to pore over the differences in the feathers of peacocks, geese, ostriches.

And that's why I detest cities. All cities have is nothing but PEOPLE, the most uninteresting things in the universe--so self-absorbed, so sure that they're the Triumph of Creation. At best, people to me are like dollar bills--nothing much in themselves, not worth much studying--they're all pretty much alike with only the slightest variations, some crisp & new & others rumpled and ragged. *Anything in itself is pretty dull: it's the relating-of-them that's exciting.*



At present I have a wonderful subject to tackle: I have a bit of a strange new plastic which automatically breaks-up every light-ray that hits it, into gorgeous rainbows. People who come up here and see it on the wall go into raptures over it, and want to know where to get it (so I tell them). But so far nobody has noticed that all those burning iridescent, so beautiful in themselves, are nothing but incomplete fragments which all come from the prosaic old bridge lamp that stands beside my desk. They see the vivid colors, but take the lamp for granted. How human of them! And their way of happiness is the same, too. They see another person and get a thrill from that person's beauty or wit or whatnot--but they don't realize that all people are simply pieces of a great Big Something of which they're not even aware, or take only for granted.

As somebody said, "Life is like a cookie jar, you get out of it only what you put into it" and "beauty is in the eye



HANNES BOK

• STEPHEN FULGIO •

of the beholder" and "to the pure all is pure". The man who sees little in life is simply telling us that he (s) is blind.

And thus it sounds in your last letter as if you went to Hawaii not explore a whole new side of Creation, but simply to encounter MORE people (and people are depressingly the same everywhere, which is why I'm bored to extinction when they talk fashions, decoration, baseball, basketball, the latest pop tunes or musical comedy, or the party they went to last week--etc etc--because what has THAT to do with REALLY living?) To me, all of them are merely time-wasters, a form of whistling in the dark, a running away from life by inventing silly little games to help eat up the life-span and enable them to go to their graves, never having had the faintest idea of the wonderful mysteries all around them.

This also is why I don't care too much for travel (meaning go to Paris or Egypt). Give me a vacant lot and I can spend

whole summers there away from people, seeing what makes the plants grow and the frogs jump--I probably am a thwarted naturalist. And it probably comes from my early years--I was shunted from pillar to post and only too glad, when I could, to run away from noisy, nosy, demanding people across the street to "the woods" where nothing at all was asked of me but a little silent patience, and then the woods would slowly begin to reveal its wonders. The happiest moments in my life were experienced there. In later years when the family chewed me out, I'd slam outdoors and walk and walk, and gradually I'd forget to be peeved because of all the teeming little surprises around me, and I'd come home at peace.



his may explain why I don't count "going to see people" as pleasure, because I absorb their feelings too easily, and I come home a nervous wreck, full of their tensions and frustrations. It's why I avoid invitations-out when I can. And then the idiots worry, "Poor Hannes, always alone, it's not GOOD for him," and they barge in here to cheer me up (but I notice that I'm always the one who has to cheer THEM up.) They just don't know how to live! But do they try to find out?

Of late years, I find (with some alarm) that a lot of the young kids that hang around and use me for a father-image, are actually starting to imitate my way of life. I worry because maybe I ought to set a better example. Ole Socrates (when am I going to be served my hemlock?). Recently an overly ambitious mother (she wants her boy to work hard and "Have everything") told me rather jealously that her son is miffing a lot of "big opportunities" to get into executive jobs with big salary (young as he is) because he tells her that Hannes hasn't much of anything and look at him, how happy he is. The mother wants him to have a nice home, nice wife, nice kids, nice clothes, nice friends—all the unimportant little nothings by which most fools (who confuse possessions with happiness) let their entire lives be run—and ruined... The rightest place in all the world seems to me to be anywhere alone and away from people... Artists have trained themselves to see something more in life than mere people (if they're worthwhile artists) so that artistic contacts may help acquire new and truer values.

With yourself, God has given you a year in which to sit still and let things happen around you—to meditate and re-evaluate all your past and the present. You confused "accomplishment" in the minuscule world of Men as living, and your body finally rebelled, trying to tell you that you were going against all Nature (those who live for the World of Men generally wind up with ulcers or worse) and eventually forcing you take time off thru illness—which is God or Nature or Infinity trying to speak to you through the instrument of your wonderful body (which, if you tried to make a duplicate of it, you couldn't reproduce in all Eternity).

You should be HAPPY therefore with such a blessed opportunity. And it ties in with your horoscope. Uranus opposition Saturn is a time when old methods of "adapting" just won't work; you've got to find safer and saner ones, or lose the fight. One way or another, by

the time Uranus-opp-Saturn-Moon is over, you'll emerge an entirely new person unto yourself. The first year is the hardest of course, because out of old habit we tend to keep on applying the old methods of adaptation to circumstances that just won't work any more, because we're in the painful process of OUTGROWING THEM.

Hence I felt rather bad that your trip to Hawaii was such a flop, about as revealing and helpful as a trip to Brook-

lyn. It was on a par with the Americans who go to Paris and then patronise American-run hotels, cafes and bars—they might just as well have stayed home. And I feel just as bad that you're now ensconced in Los Angeles, what a dreary place to be! Surely you'd be better off in some little hick burg, population of about 500, or up to 5,000 but no more—there ought to be plenty of 'em within a couple of hours' busride to LA (so you could get in, to see doctors, if



necessary). NOT a suburb, mind you--which would be like fleeing Manhattan for the Bronx.



nd, if you lack the "spirit" you used to have in earlier years, for heaven's sake, why not recapture it? It would be a plunge into the Fountain of Youth!

What makes people grow old and die is when they lose their sense of wonder. Because then they go against the law of Nature: "Grow (meaning keep an open mind and senses) or die." Kids are fun because they're interested in just about everything BUT themselves. Kids can't stand sitting around talking about dull things, as grown-ups do. There's too much to do, see, feel, wonder about--and the kid who never loses the capacity for it, is the Peter Pan of all time. But half-dead (above the neck) adults gradually force the stony-eyed kids into the dreary, murderous Ways Of Man, full of prejudices and "education" that is only another set of prejudices. And the kid "dies" inside. And you have to die inside, before your body decides it too is no longer of any use to you, and therefore is doomed to die. It is WE who kill our bodies by letting our minds decay.

And it applies in your own case. You're a kind, considerate, generous, thoroughly GOOD person, and to me a very wonderful one. The only fault with you is that you've somehow let yourself be hoodwinked into the idea that "People and Society and their interests are of importance". And you've almost killed yourself by doing so. So come on, snap out of it! People are *nothing*. Of all the billions of people since the Year One, how many are remembered? Only a few. And of those unremembered, how many killed themselves off trying to "be somebody" (as if it mattered)? And also among those billions were many thousands who "knew better" than to take each other seriously, and who really lived, and enjoyed life. Then think of the billions of cats, dogs, elephants and spiders and pheasants and roses who lived from the Year One and are just as unremembered--but probably were a lot happier than the people.

Beauty! Magic! Splendor! Mystery! It's like a flame or a fountain into which I want to wallow, to leap, to dance. What a universe, and all mine (yours too if you could only stretch out your arms to hold it)--good God, what more can any man want?

Did I thank you for the latest batch of Hawaiian clippings? Too rushed to get any work done on 'em, but ever so glad to have 'em. It's like having a new fon-

graf record--I almost hate to play it, it's so much fun just anticipating the pleasure or interest I'm going to get from it.

You bet your boots I've seen the Parrish KING COLE mural. I even have some of the original sketches Parrish made for it. Gosh, Parrish will be 90 in July, and is still painting his head off--not for money (he stopped working for money way back in the 1890's) but because it's his way of feeling wonder. His health is purty good too, though he says one ear is getting a little deaf. Since 1897 he's lived on his little plot of ground 5 miles out of the small burg of Windsor, Vermont, and much of my love for my way of life is simply just the echo of what he's told me in all his letters through the 27 years I've known him. I haven't seen him since 1943, though several friends are willing to drive me up to Windsor--because he's forever being inundated by curiosity seekers and "fans", so I don't want to become a pest to him (my voluminous letters are bad enough). His place is magic. He's friends with all sorts of critters--for a while, had a fox-friend who occasionally came a-visiting from a little glen; he generally has a cat or dog which simply wished itself on him, and has some trouble putting out bird-food in the winters (hangs "feeders" from long wires in the oaks that surround his home) because of the amusing flying squirrels that try to grab the birdfood for themselves.

Hope you've somehow had a good Xmas, and are "discovering" interesting little places and things.

With whizzens,



Hannes Bok
New York, NY 12/23/59

DEATH LURKS IN THE SEAWEED by Hannes Bok

Along the beach, the grass rose dank,
By sun glow set afire.
The curving blades grew thick and rank
Near naked trees like wire.

Alone I pondered long on Life
Which lasts so short a while.
I thought of hanging, rope, a knife--
To start me down Death's aisle.

The pain of passing made me swoon.
My heart stopped in despair.
As waves prepared my tomb, a loon
Dropped an egg upon my hair.

May 21 1942

ESCAPE by Hannes Bok

Through magic twisting corridors
and up a secret path,
past pines where shapes of fettered light
contend in vain with chaos-night,
through mirage-mazes, skirting fires
of memory from used-time's pyres,
across death's flood to this world's
shores
we fled from Satan's wrath.

The mournful past clings like a spell
which dominates the will.
We close our eyes in sleep to see
the sickly scenes that used to be,
and all the sounds that blast the ear
will never blur the call we fear,
for though we have escaped from Hell
our souls belong there still!

VISION by Hannes Bok

In a fabled forest
I discovered a dark pool,
and drank its water,
flooding my tongue with the taste of
ferment.

Phosphorescent frogs
winked luminous yellow eyes
out of the ripples
until a grey snake,
thick as a man,
lashed up from the depths and scattered
them.

It coiled on the surface of the pond
regarding me
with multiple eyes like doors
opening to death.

Its fearful jaws gaped,
and within,
rather than teeth,
were the fragrant petals of a water-lily.

May 19 1939

DREAM
by Hannes Bok

I recall a song
like fluid crystal
flecked with gold
that rode a gust
up from a black abyss,
and wove itself
about white-fire stars
with such contrapuntal reverberance
that it became fogged
and merged into a single sound,

It had been a nostalgic melody
telling of a lost place of warm light,
but compressed into one droning note,
it was oppressive
and menacing.

May 19 1939



(Kenneth Smith: continued.)

comes limited. For newsstand readers and casual fans, Kenneth Smith effectively dropped out of sight, but not to the hardcore band of devotees who awaited each new publication. To date, five issues of **PHANTASMAGORIA** have been published. The second is a collection of science fiction tales and portfolios, the third a fable from the Age of Fish, the fourth a science-fantasy horror story (with collaborations with Frazetta, Bok, Kaluta, Krenkel and others), and the fifth a fable from the Age of Insects. Color covers and interior color plates have become standard. A series of portfolios in black and white, duotone and full color have seen print. With each project, Kenneth's work continues to grow and explore and the technical accomplishments of his printer rise to

(Ramblings: continued from page 3.)

As the cover illustration by Bruce Conklin and the title implies, the volume is loaded with images of evening, death, tragedy and pathos. It's not a volume to read under a sunny sky while celebrating life. I rather wish the volume were constructed otherwise. I don't think joyful verse is only a patina over the dreariness of life. There is joy and beauty, and certainly the fantasy field is best positioned to produce verse which uplifts rather than depresses.

Now that I've stated that minor hesitation, let me proceed to recommend it. Brennan is an excellent poet and deserves recognition. Charles Melvin and Brennan deserve your support. Works in **AS EVENING ADVANCES** are collected from **ASTRAL DIMENSIONS**, **BROWN PENNY REVIEW**, **ESCAPE!**, **THE NEW YORK TIMES**, **VOICES**, **WEIRDBOOK**, **THE GEORGIA REVIEW** and **CONNECTICUT ARTISTS**. The booklet also includes one interior illustration by Ran-dy Mohr along with thirty-one poems.

I owe plugs to so many publishers and friends but I continually find my space cramped. Hopefully, within 1-2 more issues, I'll have better control of space (hear that, FC?) and begin blurb-ing more works.

Before I close, I must mention the newest Donald M. Grant (Bookseller, West Kingston, R.I. 02898) hardcover book. **RED SHADOWS** is the third edition Grant has produced of the volume. The newest 1350 copy edition (all copies signed by the artist) features all new artwork by Jeff Jones. Jones' work has changed over the years. He began as a student of the Frazetta style but luckily abandoned that along the way.

Despite my enthusiasm for the illustration, I question the wisdom of a third edition of the Solomon Kane stor-

ies. Grant has proceeded to produce new editions of his earlier hardbacks (i.e. **MARCHERS OF VALHALLA, SOWERS OF THUNDER** and now **RED SHADOWS**). In each case, the volume became available in paperback almost concurrent with the new Grant edition. Grant's books have typically gone out of print quickly, but that trend has been broken with the reprints.

I guess my concern is two-fold. I want Grant to be successful because the quality of his publications sets a standard for all small press publishers. I can only speculate that an edition which does not sell quickly drains resources and delays further volumes. I would guess that **MARCHERS** and **SOWERS** are draining Grant's resources. That's a blow to us all.

Secondly, I know that Grant has more Conan volumes in the works plus an artbook or two. I also know he holds first printing rights on the Robert E. Howard pseudo-autobiographical novel "Post Oaks And Sand Roughs". I'd personally prefer his energy be directed toward producing new works rather than reprinting old. Even the reprint editions with new artwork lack the punch of a new work.

If you already have one of the earlier editions of **RED SHADOWS** or if you own the Centaur Press paperbacks (**THE HAND OF KANE**, **SOLOMON KANE**, etc.), then you may be in a quandry on ordering the third edition. If you order only for the illustration, you won't be disappointed.

(Last minute note: I understand from F & SF Book Company, the official distributors for Donald Grant's books, that **RED SHADOWS** is out of print! I hope they're wrong or you'll have a hard time finding a copy. Maybe Grant has nothing to worry about after all.)

phasis upon the Golden Age (1860-1920) is as extensive as his knowledge of aesthetic and technical aspects of art. The past masters of fantasy art took their craft to the limits of perfection and such devotion is mirrored in Kenneth's work, yet influences are minimal; his work is distinctly original.

The past couple of years have seen a partial return of Kenneth Smith to the national marketplace. **SCHLOMO RAVEN**, from Byron Preis, was colored and calligraphed by Kenneth. **THE FIRST KINGDOM**, an epic comic adventure, has had Smith-colored covers, and just recently, **SORCERERS**, a book on current fantasy artists, featured a section on the artist, though the editor's choice of pieces and reproduction hardly do Kenneth justice. Further national appearances are in the works.

The four reprinted drawings in the following portfolio are but a minute sample of the man's diverse and fertile imagination, just as this appreciation barely scratches the surface in trying to touch upon the many sides to the man and his art. It is hoped the reader will be encouraged to pursue the acquisition of further examples of Kenneth Smith's work and in so doing, help finance the tremendous expense of quality printing. Those so inclined should send \$1.00 and a long SASE for a thick, profusely illustrated catalog of available items, a number of which are in short supply. The address is: Box 20020-A, L.S.U Station, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70893.

Enjoy!

—Stephen Riley

(Contributors Notes: continued.)

ing in the corners of your apartment? Or perhaps standing day and night in a pentangle?

A. E. van Vogt was born Alfred Elton van Vogt and sold his first story to the legendary John Campbell in early 1939. He's now associated with Kuttner, Leiber, Heinlein, Asimov, Hubbard and others as one of the grand masters of the Golden Age of science fiction. To our knowledge, the creator of "The Weapons Shop" and "The Balch Destroyer" (among hundreds of other tales) has never before been connected with the Howard canon. We're pleased to tie him in with our humble little round-robin effort.

Next issue Brian Lumley and Frank Belknap Long join the round-robin team with two new chapters to this epic drama.





THE ROAD 'CROSS THE RUSHES

By: J. E. Coplin

The Marsh Road runs as would an arrow,
Atop the crumbling earthen dike.
Framed by willow and fog does it span the vast bog,
As 'cross ocean of rustling rushes it strikes,
Brick laid bankways but oxencart narrow.

To pass on footpath, bridge or ford
Stiff toll the Baron's bailiffs claimed.
Yet the road 'cross the slews to post watch they'd refuse,
And the door to their toll-house banged loose in its frame.
For they knew there the Rush Dwarf was Lord.

From boots to coat to wide brimmed hat
His clothes were wove of rush and reed.
Life unbothered he'd pick yet his temper was quick.
And the cudgel he carried of tight woven weeds.
Could lay those that troubled him flat.

And though the Dwarf paid few folks harm,
And n'er outside his marsh was seen,
The Baron's throat bobbed for of toll was he robbed.
And he swore he would hang till the crows picked him clean.
Charging this to his stout men at arms.

Dawn with the blackbirds woke the sky
Above the gleam of bell-shaped helms.
As with crossbow and pike, troops swarmed down from the dike,
To slog through the mud of the Dwarf's silent realm,
Beating down the brown rushes like scythes.

E'er deeper in the marsh they fanned,
Till reds rose round them like four walls.
Then by forces unseen, the stalks gaped like a screen,
And out stepped a grim figure, both terrible and small,
And the Lord of the Marsh raised his hand.

The soldiers screamed, the rushes roared,
As marsh to violent life was flung!
Round mailed limbs swamp grass wound, pulled them
struggling down,
And when foul shallow water had filled every lung,
The reds rose to sway as before.

The Marsh Road runs as would an arrow,
Atop the crumbling earthen dike.
No one dares use the road, save green lizards and toads,
For the bones of men who came with crossbow and pike,
Have been cleaned by the crows for their marrow.

THE GARDEN OF OLD NIGHT

By Steven G. Mitchell

...I am the skull set in the Tree. Like a spiral of evil amethysts turning through black smoke, wisdom glistens in the ashen hollows of my eyes. Down through all the never-ending rout of nights and days, I wait, and I watch....And now I spy the rider, leagues distant, as he comes down from the bleak mountains. For all his weariness, he does not falter. He plunges through the angry torrents of the Silver River; and his burning, blazing spear assails the river-sprite that rises to oppose him. Then onward, onward to the sundered plains, where the red flames swirl amid the ancient ragged catacombs....

Isb eryr the warlock, Lord of the Land of Tears, marvelled at the wildness of the country about him. It ran broken to all

horizons, gashed by vast ravines, smoldering pits. Lit by the dim rays of the umber sun, necropolis brooded beneath the heavy cobalt skies. Isb eryr found the land more oppressively barren than Kulevata had led him to believe. Still, the way was clear to follow--the straight, paved road, as old perhaps as the Elder Age, its nameless makers long-since vanished back into the dark earth of Errrahaol.

Between stark, gigantic rocks he rode. The winds played this way and that in the steep gulleys; dust devils danced a wicked sarraband around him. Isb eryr wiped stinging grit from his face, drank long from his horn of wine. Black earth...harsh rock...flickering crimson light in the distance...he shook his head and rode deeper into the wasteland.

He came down a gravelly slope and out upon a wide reach of withered grasses. A mottled river, wherein drifted diseased and putrefying masses of uncertain origin, flowed sluggishly across the plain. A bridge of basalt masonry spanned the river; and upon it waited three riders. Armored in bronze they were, and their horned casques hid their features.

Isb eryr spurred his unicorn. He shouted strange rhymes, that brought a scorching rain of many-colored molten drops down upon the riders. One fell silently, seared and lifeless. The others lifted their brazen swords. Isb eryr's spear flamed in answer to his wrath. The spear lashed out, a fiery dazzle, beating down their attack. Isb eryr stabbed; gurgling blood sprayed from a riven neck. A heavy blow smote against the warlock's buckler. He staggered. The unicorn struck with its razor horn, goring the last rider's mount. The horse reeled, plunged with its rider into the river of putrescence and decay. Isb eryr galloped on across the bridge and down the ancient road.

...Aye, I trow well the reason he comes. Isb eryr-- sorcerer, tyrant, man of blood and iron. He has listened long to the tales of Kulevata, there in the crystal fane on the black reef. Kulevata, whispering of the hidden Garden beyond the Mountains of Hyll-Matan...murmuring of the Tree that grows therein, with its roots that suck the hells and its branches that tangle the stars. Kulevata, you tempter, you troubler of veils! A dark mind fired with the promise of darker masteries, and one comes riding, ever riding, for the Garden of Old Night. But I wait; and the leaves upon the Tree gleam in the umber light--gleam like eyes, eyes full of a cold prescience....

Cruel with thorns and brambles, the dank maze of the Garden sprawled across the stony plateau. Isb eryr reined up, his gaze seeking beyond the twisted boughs and vines--to the Tree itself, dim, colossal, in its cloak of mist and shadow. There, could he win through to it, was the treasure Kulevata had spoken of, the piled heaps of mystic gems, each of which held fast a mighty intelligence--and to the owner, mastery of the spirits therein. He turned the unicorn, and they rode slowly widdershins around the Garden's rim, searching a way through the dense wall of matted foliage. At length, exasperated, Isb eryr leveled his spear at the vegetation; bright flame touted forth, opening a path through the thorns and creepers. The tumid smoke of guttering damp plant life lifted, thick and cloud-like.

A strain of music came trailing through the trees. The unicorn pawed the earth uneasily. Isb eryr waited. The music faded, but its echoes repeated themselves for a long time. Rider and steed pushed through a bank of rotting lilac to a narrow stone pathway, leading off toward the Tree. They followed the path into a dark glade, where pallid things moved like leprosy shades, back and forth over the sward. Isb eryr remembered the words of Kulevata, the warning concerning the Worms of the Garden....He chanted down the fiery rain again, sweeping it through the glade. White, swollen flesh burned and sloughed away from monstrous shapes; but the mutilated Worms persisted in their dance-like measure. More of them wriggled out of the shrubbery nearby. They had the faces of children, he saw; but their eyes were full of an olden malice.

Isb eryr, slayer of monsters, enslaver of demons, knew the touch of apprehension then; wondered at the true nature of the powers he was violating. The magic rain had not stopped them, and he doubted the efficacy of the spear. A more potent magistry was needed. But he had not time for pentacles and lengthy conjurations. The Mysteries of Blood, he decided....He drew the onyx-handled athame whose name is Sarai on and slit

the palm of his left hand. Blood welled; he swung the hand through the air, scattering globlets of crimson.

"By my compact with Jehennine, Queen of Blood, and by the three names Eramythur, Jaylle, and Meyrr-al-Rhune, I compel you, spirits of blood--perform my will!"

And the globes of blood waxed fat and monstrous; and they rolled across the glade; and they swept up the Worms of the Garden, binding them in scarlet seas. Isb eryr rode swiftly out of the clearing and down the path. Ahead, he saw the base of the Tree.

...A champion of discord and dominion. But not the first to seek the bounty of the Tree. The ravens gather now, their conversation a solace to me in the long dusk of the world. They speak of rich feasts, dark feasts. Their eyes are avid as the rider approaches. The unicorn is wiser than its master; it shies away at the sight of the Tree and will not be gentled. But the warlock stares with a wild exultation, caught up by the transcendent import of the symbol masked in the form of the Tree. I feel the spiders of wonder and terror as they scuttle upon the webs of his mind. Already the spell of the Tree is riveting chains around him, already he is lost....

The Tree--it could not be grasped at one glance. Upward and upward it soared, its outrageous curves and angles seeming to bypass space itself and touch the very stars....The placement of its branches gave strange intimation of the skein of forces woven through all the planes....

Isb eryr tore his gaze away with difficulty. He focused instead on his immediate surroundings. Set wide apart, nine grey stones ringed the Tree's base. The stones were rune-marked, and the runes did not cease from flowing and changing. The Runes of the Dead, Isb eryr recognized them, and knew that the stones were tombstones. Who lay like a guard of honor at the Tree's foot? A door of weathered oaken planks had been set in the Tree's side; inside, Kulevata had said, lay the treasure--hollow. Were there no guardians? Isb eryr saw only ravens perched in the branches, and a yellowed skull fixed above the lintel of the door. He dismounted, spear upheld, and stepped forward through the ring of stones.

He had half-expected the earth to burst asunder and the liches of once-mighty kings to oppose him. But nothing happened. He stood before the door. It had no handle, but lay a trifle ajar. Isb eryr stretched forth a hand, then hesitated, stirred obscurely by the sight of that bleached and pitted skull over the lintel. An atavistic response to an emblem of mortality, he told himself; and he pushed the door open.

The jewel-hoard blazed in the darkness. Yellow agates and scarlet corals; blue of turquoise, deep emerald of malachite; the perfect silver gleam of opals. Isb eryr gazed all around, bemused by more than the dazzling radiance of the gems; a sense of power beat upon him, a thing built up out of many individual currents, swelling into one great theme of mystic force. Force for the wielder, he thought; and he flamed with the sudden vision of Errathao l whelmed by the legion of spirits that would be his to command....

He stooped over a huge ruby, burning with a fierce red light. What power, he speculated, lies therein, awaiting my pleasure? Out impulse he lifted it up, held it before his eyes--and gasped. Alien thoughts occluded his brain--sterility, paralysis, the end of hope, and eternal drifting on scarlet waters, the hateful sighing of the dead in their riddled graves....He dropped the accursed thing, staggered back out of the doorway. The sky, the branches of the Tree, the knowing visage of the skull--all, all spun in circles around his head....

...Equilibrium in all things, is that not the great law of the cosmos? The spirit of Keth-Andreys, who wrought spells among the Elyon eighty-eight centuries ago--ere he took the road to the Garden--soars away through unguessable dimensions, freed by the intruder's touch; and a new soul toils within its crystalline prison. Before me, the warlock's body lies, face turned sightlessly toward the stars that mock all human flesh. And now two black leaves fall down to cover the dead eyes. In their own time, the ravens will follow....

I hear a laughter drifting over the Mountains of Hyll-Matan, a laughter born in a crystal fane atop a black reef. I remember such laughter--the day the Kings of Old Night raised up their Garden, and Kulevata laughed, as he set me in the Tree to watch forever....

OH BABYLON, LOST BABYLON

By Robert E. Howard

Bab-ili's women gazed upon our spears,
And roses flung, and sang to see us ride;
We built a glory for the marching years,
And fixed our throne with silver nails of pride.
Our horses' hoofs were shod with brazen fears.
We laved our hands in blood and iron tears
And laughed to hear how shackled kings had died.
Our chariots awoke the sleeping world.
The thunder of our hoofs the mountains broke,
Before our spears were empires' banners furled
And death and doom and iron winds were whirled,
And slaughter rode before, and clouds and smoke;
Then in the desert lands the tribes awoke.

Oh Babylon, lost Babylon, where now
The opal altar and the golden spire,
The tower and the legend and the lyre?
Oh, withered fruit upon a broken bough!
The sobbing desert winds still whisper how
The golden city of the gods' desire
Fell in the smoke and crumbled in the fire,
And lizards bask upon her columns now.
And rhymers sing of ages gold and gone
But Babylon has faded with the dawn.

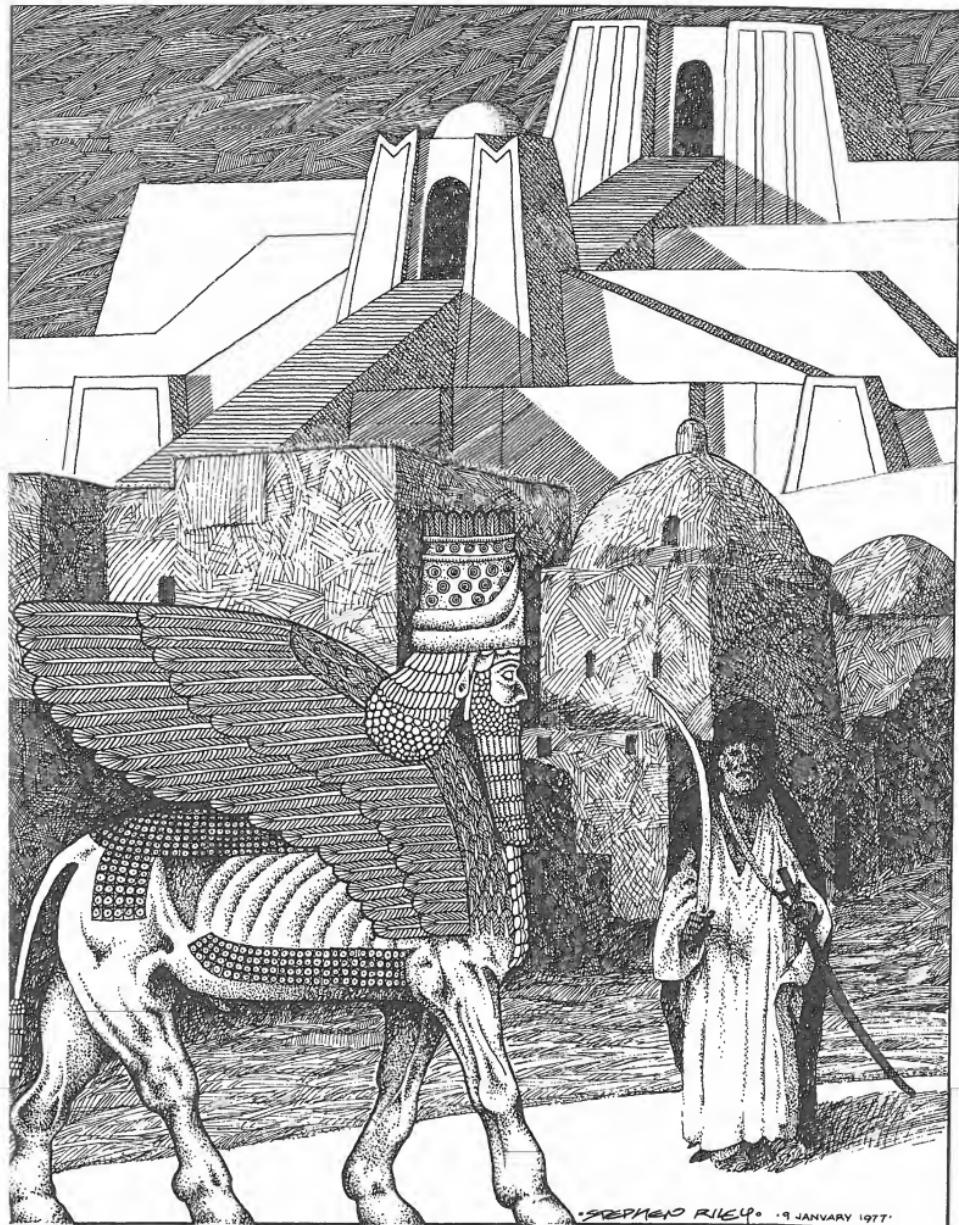
NIGHTWALKERS

By: C.C. Norton

The night moves slow
Like a dark river through my veins,
As the pale red moon mourns low
And lightens ancient shadows in my mind.
She, the moon, Selene,
Mystic goddess of three forms,
Conceals the warring in her soul, for
Those who know her sorrow she will find.

She saw him, loved him, sought him;
Trembling lay beside him, and as
Passion mingled sweetly in the night,
She gave the fragrant cup to drink and fill.
But a teacher of strange ways is love.
The woman's artless joy became a fear;
And when the dawn put out the stars,
She left him sleeping, lifeless-cold and still.

Nightwalkers, we are wakened by her sighs,
Echoed in green stillness
And the nightbirds' haunting cries,
To become the ancient river's ceaseless flow.
A voices' whispered warnings to unheard.
Transcending myths and heroes in its flight,
My vagrant spirit touches yours
While winds of ageless longings rise below.



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